

3

Using a social justice lens to explore the possibilities and limitations of flexible learning provision in a South African TVET college

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SUMMARY In its preamble, the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET) strategic plan for 2015 to 2020 identified ways to expand access to education and training. However, in South Africa, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges' enrolment growth is inhibited by inadequate physical infrastructure and a shortage of additional and relevant human resources (DHET, 2018). The draft *Open Learning Policy Framework for the Post-School Education and Training* (2017) recommends that the principle of flexibility be applied to increase student access and support their success. This exploratory case study focuses on possibilities and limitations of flexible learning provision at a selected TVET college in the Free State province. It adopts Nancy Fraser's (1995, 2005) theory of social justice, which emphasizes parity of participation with respect to economic, cultural and political dimensions, to discuss ways in which flexible learning is socially just. COVID-19 lockdowns severely curtailed this study to virtual interviews with two institutional managers only, as students were not readily available. The transcripts were subsequently coded along Fraser's three dimensions of social justice. The study demonstrates that flexible learning provision responded to the economic dimensions of transport poverty by providing access to curriculum content via online platforms, radio broadcasts and hardcopy materials deposited for collection at selected physical destinations. In relation to cultural parity, it reveals that the college provides a pedagogically responsive intervention programme as a second opportunity for students to succeed. Politically, the study indicates that assessment practices at the college are exclusionary due to national assessment policies that constrain flexibility. This chapter contributes towards understanding the practices and policies that influence flexible learning provision as an aspirational form of open learning as well as the complex ways in which social injustices are entangled in the South African PSET sector.

Keywords: flexible learning, second-chance students, open learning, social justice, TVET

Introduction

In 2017, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) published the *Open Learning Policy Framework for Post-School Education and Training* for public comment. The policy framework was conceived with the aim of addressing the 2013 *White Paper for Post-School Education*'s mandate to increase student access and improve their success. Within the framework, 'open learning' is introduced as comprising several principles to promote access and success in the post-school education and training (PSET) sector. Underpinning the open learning concept is an innate concern for social justice. In DHET's (2017) words, open learning "is driven by a concern for social justice and therefore motivated by the need for redress, equity in access to opportunity, flexibility and choice, and by an equal concern for quality and real success in learning" (p. 412). In 2019, DHET's Open Learning Directorate sought to understand how PSET institutions are understanding and enacting open learning principles and consequently commissioned the Cases on Open Learning (COOL) research project.

The COOL project comprises 16 cases focused on strategies in which various technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges and universities are enacting open learning or not. The focus of this chapter is on flexible learning as one of the key open learning principles. Using the case of Goldfields TVET College, this chapter illustrates how flexible learning is employed to support success by providing students an alternative route to complete selected courses that are impeding graduation. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (1995, 2005) theory of social justice, the chapter explores how the intervention at Goldfields TVET College enables or inhibits parity of participation from an economic, cultural and political perspective.

Open learning to widen access and success

First introduced in the 1995 *White Paper on Education and Training*, the concept of open learning was reiterated in the 2013 *White Paper for Post-School Education* and consolidated in the draft *Open Learning Policy Framework for Post-School Education and Training* that was released for comment in 2017. According to DHET (2017), the purpose and explicit goal of the policy framework is to "introduce open learning practices as one practical way of addressing crucial issues of widening access to affordable, quality learning opportunit[ies]" (p. 366). The policy framework is explicitly motivated by a concern for social justice and the need for redress in South African PSET.

The two key fundamentals grounding the open learning concept are access and success. As written in the policy framework:

The policy framework steers the sector towards making increasing use of cost-effective modalities conducive to open learning, in the interests of increased access (translating into increased enrolments) and increased success (translating into improved throughput, success rates and employability), without sacrificing learning quality. (DHET, 2017, p. 386)

Access is interpreted as increased enrolment. In relation to the TVET sector, in particular, the 2013 *White Paper* mandated an expansion of 2.5 million headcount enrolments by 2030. In a statistics report released in 2021, DHET reported an enrolment of 673 490 in 2019. This reflects a 2.5% increase when compared with 2018 (657 133), but a decrease

when compared to 2017 (703 705). The number is thus still some way off the 2013 *White Paper* target of 2.5 million by 2030. To assist in the process of increasing enrolment, the Open Learning Policy Framework (OLPF) outlines the need to remove barriers to access and provide flexibility of provision.

Success is specifically interpreted as improved throughput rate and employability. DHET defines throughput rate as “the rate at which a cohort successfully completes a qualification within the stipulated timeframe for that qualification” (Khuluvhe & Mathibe, 2021, p. 3). The throughput rate for all students in South Africa who enrolled in 2016 for NCV Level 2 and who completed NCV Level 4 in 2018 is reported at 9.2%. As Khuluvhe and Mathibe (2021) note, this figure is significantly off the target of 75% as set by the National Development Plan for 2030. To assist in the process of improving success, the OLPF highlights the need for quality of provision.

With access and success established as two guiding tenets of open learning, open learning is defined as:

An educational approach which combines the principles of learner-centredness, lifelong learning, *flexibility of learning provision*, the *removal of barriers to access learning*, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the *construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed*, and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems. (DHET, 2017, p. 363, emphasis added)

The principle of flexibility is described as “allowing learners to increasingly determine where, when, what and how they learn, as well as the pace at which they will learn” (DHET, 2017, p. 371). In the case of Goldfields TVET College, flexibility of learning provision manifests in the form of when and how second-chance students are taught. These are students who have failed the mainstream programme but are given an opportunity to retake the course through a second-chance intervention programme. Second-chance students are taught at a slightly adjusted pace, but they cover the same curriculum content and adhere to the same assessment protocols as the students undertaking a course for the first time. Pedagogical interventions by the college to support remote teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic further showcase the possibilities of flexible learning provision to support the concept of ‘where, when, and how’ students can learn, but also accentuates the tensions around the set assessment times.

Understanding flexible learning

In a draft report mapping flexible learning and teaching at the University of Western Cape, the Division for Lifelong Learning (DLL) (2014) offers a comprehensive review of the concept of flexible learning both in relation to South African policies and international literature. In relation to national policies in South Africa, the DLL observes that flexible learning is often described in relation to online, distance and blended learning. Moreover, there tends to be a distinction made between full-time and part-time provisions. The DLL (2014) posits that “perpetuat[ing] the dichotomy of ‘full-time’ and ‘part-time’ provision” impoverishes the call for open learning (p. 17). Jones and Walters (2015) argue that, in fact, “the notion of a

‘traditional’ student is no longer valid” (p. 63) and that instead the ‘non-traditional’ student has become the norm. As Jones and Walters explain:

The majority of *all* students either work in the formal or informal sector; care for the old or the young; are parents and/or surrogate parents to siblings; live and learn with disability or chronic illness; are returning or interrupting students; and live and learn in informal or informal housing environments. (2015, p. 63)

In relation to international literature, the DLL (2014) observes that there is no uniform understanding of the concept; instead, flexibility is conceived as a “wide range of responses to different situations, to different needs, underpinned by different discourses” (p. 65).

Within neoliberal discourses, for instance, the DLL (2014) observes that flexibility is used to describe “multi-skilled, flexible workers”, that is, “flexible citizens” who can survive in the fast-paced knowledge economy (p. 18). Within managerialist discourses around the massification of higher education, flexibility is described in relation to “cost-effective means of taking education to scale”; and within economic discourses, that focus on the efficiency of higher education following diminished state funding, flexibility is discussed in relation to reducing costs to the academic institution (DLL, 2014, p. 18). The social justice discourse that is of relevance to this study, and aligns with the concept of open learning, is that which relates to lifelong learning and the democratisation of higher education. This discourse “emphasises learner-centeredness, enhancing equity and access, and alternative admission pathways, with second-and even third-chance opportunities for mature learners” (DLL, 2014, pp. 18-19). According to the DLL (2014), flexible learning in this context:

takes on multiple forms to accommodate the different challenges that people face at different stages of their lives. It is seen as enabling lifelong learning and increasing and widening participation – both increasing actual numbers as well as diversity of participation – in higher education. (p. 19)

The notion of ‘second-and even third-chance’ resonates with how flexibility is employed in this case study, where Goldfields TVET College has developed a pedagogic intervention programme to help students who have failed the full-time programme, a second opportunity at passing a course.

Exploring enabling national policies and institutional practices in South Africa, Bolton et al. (2020) broadly described flexible learning as comprising:

aspects which supported learners, such as using RPL [Recognition of Prior Learning] and CAT [Credit Accumulation and Transfer] processes for access or advanced standing, flexible hours, part-time studies, the opportunity to ‘stop in and stop out’ of studies, repeat lessons, blended learning, extended programmes, flexible teaching and learning methods, using technology in teaching and learning, flexible administration systems, flexible modes of assessment, flexible mind-sets in organisational leadership, and others. (p. 107)

Bolton et al. (2020) observe that although there was no commonly understood definition for flexible learning pathways, the interviewees in their study were in general more acquainted

with the terms “articulation” and “articulated learning-and-work pathway” (p. 107). Furthermore, they discern at least three ways which flexible learning pathways can take: systemic, specific and individual. Systemic learning pathways involve “‘joined-up’ qualifications and/or part-qualifications, professional designations, and other elements that are part of the official system”; specific learning pathways involve “arrangements such as RPL, CAT, Memoranda of Understanding (MoU), Memoranda of Agreement (MoA) and others that support systemic articulation”; and individual learning pathways entail “flexible responsive systems that enable students to navigate and transition across barriers that they encounter” (Bolton et al., 2020, p. 11).

While there is no common understanding of flexible learning, Jones and Walters (2015) note that there is a general consensus that flexible learning is concerned about when, where, how and at what pace learning occurs. In this sense, flexible learning is about providing the learner the power to choose. According to the UK’s Higher Education Academy (2015), “Flexible learning requires a balance of power between institutions and students and seeks to find ways in which choice can be provided that is economically viable and appropriately manageable for institutions and students alike” (p. 1).

To foreground what flexible learning means in practice for institutions, the DLL (2014) makes use of the term ‘flexible learning and teaching provision’. This is defined as

an inclusive, student-centred approach that promotes flexibility in admissions criteria, curriculum design, teaching and learning modes and assessment, with appropriate support systems and services, for the purpose of developing graduate attributes throughout the learning process so that students can make a positive difference in the world (DLL, 2014, p. 7).

This definition highlights flexibility in relation to (1) admission criteria; (2) curriculum design; (3) teaching and learning modes and assessments; and (4) support system and services. Identifying these as parameters for flexible learning and teaching provision, these components have been used as a framework to reflect on flexible learning within a blended part-time Baccalauereus Technologiae (BTech) Architectural Technology programme aimed at mature students (Morkel & Cronjé, 2019). For DHET’s open learning agenda, the strength of this definition is that it highlights specifically where flexibility needs to be applied to increase access and improve success.

Theoretical framework: Social justice

This study draws on Nancy Fraser’s (1995, 2005) social justice framework to understand how flexible learning can enable or inhibit social justice. The framework has been used to explore the adoption of open educational resources (Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter, 2018) and development of open textbooks (Cox et al., 2020) from a social justice perspective.

According to Fraser (2005), social justice involves ‘parity of participation’ which “requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life” (p. 73). Fraser identifies three dimensions that can affect parity of participation, namely, the economic, the cultural and the political. While recognising that the three dimensions are “imbricated with one another” in reality, Fraser (1995, p. 70) separates the three dimensions for analytical purposes. Moreover, Fraser (1995) distinguishes between affirmative and transformative

responses to addressing economic, cultural and political injustices. Affirmative responses, or what Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter (2018) refer to as “ameliorative” responses, involves “correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them”, while transformative responses involve “correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying framework” (p. 82).

With respect to the economic dimension, Fraser (2005) proposes that economic maldistribution can arise when people are “impeded from full participation by economic structures that deny them resources they need in order to interact with others as peers” (p. 73). In relation to flexible learning, economic maldistribution can manifest as a result of what can be described as ‘time poverty’. That is, where individuals are denied the opportunity to interact with others as peers because of time constraints. Working individuals, for instance, may be denied the opportunity to gain a better qualification or upskill because of rigid educational programmes that prevent working individuals from working and studying at the same time. An ameliorative response may be offering affordable part-time courses to suit students’ home and working commitments. A transformative response would be “fundamental shift in thinking about learning and teaching in higher education” (Jones & Walters, 2015, p. 77) and in the way that it is financed (cf. Bolton et al., 2020). Another form of economic maldistribution is ‘transport poverty’. In the case of this study, transport poverty – where individuals are denied the opportunity to interact with others as peers because of transport constraints – is a barrier that can have consequences for personal safety as well.

In relation to the cultural dimension, Fraser (2005) posits that cultural misrecognition can bar people “from interacting on terms of parity by institutionalised hierarchies of cultural value that deny them the requisite standing” (p. 73). For example, in the case with TVET colleges, English is the mandated language of instruction. Students who struggle with fluency in English thus can be disadvantaged in successfully engaging with the TVET curriculum because of the language barrier. More fundamentally the content with which students are engaging is likely, at this point in South Africa’s history, to be from a Western perspective and unlikely to take much local indigenous knowledge into account. An ameliorative response, for example, would be to provide some options for the language of teaching and learning, whereas a transformative response would allow for students’ choice of any national language.

Cultural misrecognition can also manifest in pedagogical approaches. That is, where the cultural norms of tuition deny students participation. Didactic pedagogies, for instance, are potentially exclusionary in that these approaches to teaching and learning promote absorption of information and rote learning rather than active engagement with learning. Social constructivist pedagogies (Vygotsky, 1978), on the other hand, can be argued to be more inclusive in that they allow students to interrogate and construct their own knowledge. The findings in this chapter indicate that the pedagogical approach adopted in the second-chance intervention programme may have been key to the success of students within the programme.

In the political dimension, Fraser (2005) advances the idea that misrepresentation “wrongly deny some of the included the chance to participate fully as peers” and more troublesome misframing that can arise when the political decision rules are drawn in such a way that “wrongly exclude some people from the chance to participate at all” (Fraser, 2005, p. 76). For instance, when an educational policy is drawn up without consulting those whom the policy affects, this can be considered as an injustice arising from political misrepresentation. An ameliorative response, for instance, would be to consult with students

about course scheduling, assessment submission times, etc., whereas a transformative response would involve them in the deliberation of the practices that affect them (e.g., curriculum and assessment methods).

The case study

The site of study is Goldfields TVET College which is situated in the mining town, Welkom, in Matjhabeng Local Municipality of the Free State Province. The majority of the students at the college come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, some from informal settlements. The tuition fees at the college, however, are high and unaffordable for most students. For this reason, the college has made it a policy that all prospective students are required to apply for National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding prior to admission at the college.

Flexible learning at this college is illustrated through two programmes that cater for two different kinds of students. The one programme is a second-chance intervention programme that is aimed at providing provision for students who are prohibited from proceeding to the next level, as a result of failing more than two or three subjects within a programme or course of study. In the second programme, flexible learning is provided as a means for working students to improve their skills or qualification. With respect to the second-chance intervention programme, the college did not have sufficient physical space to meet the demand of the re-intake of second-chance students as part of the usual on-campus classes. As a way to meet the needs of these second-chance students, additional, but less frequent, sessions of a shorter duration were arranged in the late afternoons (17:00–19:00) to accommodate the working students who would then complete the outstanding work on their own at home.

Unfortunately, these second-chance students no longer qualify for NSFAS funding and thus must fund their own studies. The cost in 2020 was an average of R3 500 per subject, much higher than the full-time student fee, and students are limited to a maximum of two subjects per semester (6 months).

Method

The site of study was purposely chosen by DHET at the start of the project because the college was perceived as applying flexible learning innovatively. Fieldwork for the study was conducted in 2020, but due to lockdown regulations following the COVID-19 pandemic, the scale of the study was reduced from including staff and students to staff only. For this case, one manager and one senior manager were interviewed remotely through Zoom. DHET had provided the COOL team with an initial contact and the manager and the senior manager were recommended through the applications made to conduct the research at the site. The semi-structured interview questions centred around understanding how flexibility of learning provision was being applied at the college and the extent to which the practice enables or inhibits social justice. After the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were returned to the participants for member checking. The data was then analysed and coded deductively in MSExcel along Fraser's three dimensions of social justice.

A key limitation of the study is that, due to the pandemic, students were not interviewed. This has limitations in terms of understanding how students perceive the flexible learning and teaching provisions at the institution and whether there may be tensions or contradictions between what the institution perceives as flexible learning and students' needs and desires.

Findings

Flexibility as a means to support success

Within the second-chance intervention programme, flexibility is employed as an intervention to assist students, who have failed subjects within the full-time programme, to retake the failed subjects through the programme. Flexibility of learning provision, in this way, supports the concept of success through aiding students' completion.

The intervention programme for this group of students consists of one-to-two-hour contact sessions that are held once a week. Due to infrastructure limitations, sessions are held in the late afternoons and early evenings (17:00-19:00) when the full-time programme students are not making use of campus facilities. This is also a time that accommodates the working students.

At the inception of the intervention programme in June 2018, eleven subjects were made available for students to repeat. The subjects were chosen because of their status as poor performance subjects. The pass rate in the first cycle was approximately 60%. In the second cycle of the intervention programme in 2019, it was reported that ten of the eleven subjects had a 100% pass rate. The manager, recounting this, described being 'quite surprised' by the success rate.

So I was also quite surprised because those were traditionally learners that actually failed the subjects in the past, and I'm very sure that if those learners were just put back in the mix, I'm not sure if some of them even would have passed in the normal methods of teaching that we use. (Manager)

The list of subjects offered in the intervention programme in 2020 increased to include information processing, computer practice, public relations, labour relations, personnel management, sales management, marketing communication, education didactic practical and training, personnel training, marketing management, day care personnel development, child health, education, day care communication, education psychology, day care management, communication, office practice, financial accounting and entrepreneurship.

The pedagogical strategy adopted in the limited one-hour weekly contact sessions per subject, involves facilitation more than direct teaching. Students are given the opportunity to pose questions on what was done the previous week and work for the next week is then assigned.

Like I said, a very shortened one-hour session a week is a face-to-face interaction, but the lecturers quickly learned how to do with that one hour because you can't teach in one hour, you actually basically need to facilitate and you need to say to them, listen, this is what, you know, they can ask questions on what they had to do the previous week and you basically give them work for the next week. (Manager)

In this sense, learning mostly happened outside the classroom, within the students' own space, according to their own pace and during times convenient to them. The classroom space was mainly used to monitor progress, clarify concepts and plan for self-study. WhatsApp groups were created for communication between sessions.

When asked about what factors might have contributed to the success of the intervention programme, the manager suggested that student commitment played a key role since they have limited time with the lecturer and that these students must fund themselves because DHET will no longer fund their studies. In the manager's words:

Commitment from learners, as they have to work very hard most of their time alone, they realize that due to limited time with a lecturer, they will not be spoon fed thus if they do not work on their own, they will fail. Furthermore 99% of these students repeat the subject and they have to pay unfunded rates, which is very high, they cannot afford to keep failing and paying for themselves. (Manager)

The manager clarified the intricacies of the second-chance system that highlights the importance of the examination grades and financial implications.

If a student gets between 35% and 39% during the first attempt, the college can register a student for examination only. This student will not sit in during normal class and only write the exam or the supplementary exam during the next exam cycle. The fee for [the] exam only is R183 per subject. If a student gets below 35% he must fully repeat the subject and also attend more than 80% of the class in order to write exams. In this case the [second-chance] students will have to pay the full fee. (Manager)

In another programme at the college, flexibility of learning provision is employed as a strategy to help working students upskill. In this sense, it offers them an opportunity to study during their discretionary time while employed.

The limitations of assessment timing in optimising flexible learning

A constraint of the intervention programme described above is that the assessment policy, which all TVET colleges must follow, has not been adjusted to reflect the concept of flexible learning. The manager described the assessment practice as being 'very rigid' as assessment in the intervention programme follows exactly the same practice and timeline as the full-time programme. In other words, the students in the intervention programme are required to complete the same assessments as students in the ordinary programme.

The Department of Higher Education and Training is encouraging us to go the route of open learning, but when it comes to assessment, the structures are very rigid. Because our approach to open learning is still fitting within the courses that the Department is presenting, we have to stick to the number of assessments because learners must have ICASS [Internal Continuous Assessment] marks to write the final examination. (Manager)

The manager hinted that this is seemingly unfair as students within the intervention programme have fewer contact hours compared to the full-time students in the ordinary programme.

So even if ... the learners are basically studying from home and they're just coming in for a very short time during the week, those learners still have to write all the tasks, the tests and

the assignments, like any other learner that's on a full-time basis. The Department doesn't give us due to say, because these learners only have a few hours contact, they can write less assignments or do less tasks. (Manager)

Also, the intervention programme students must make themselves available to write exams at the same time as the full-time students, thereby not optimising the flexible learning imperative of allowing students to “determine where, when, what and how they learn, as well as the pace at which they will learn” (DHET, 2017, p. 371).

We had to arrange it in such a way that those learners, although they're studying mostly from home, when the full-time students are writing a particular assessment, they had to come in and write it with them, because we cannot draw up different papers all the time, for various reasons, also to try and maintain the standard. (Manager)

In this way, the assessment practice is at odds with the principles that underpin flexible learning provision.

Flexibility as a means to overcome transport poverty and threats to personal safety

The case of Goldfields TVET College points towards the possibility of flexibility as a means of overcoming transport poverty and threats to personal safety. The senior manager described the availability, the cost and safety of transport as being barriers to learning, explaining that a lack of adequate transport not only affects attendance, but also students' safety, as gender-based violence is reportedly a persistent problem in the town in which the college is situated.

I think I've mentioned that we are serving students from informal settlements. Students don't have transport. They're using lifts to come to the college, which we are discouraging that because so many things happening, especially for our lady students. It affects us also because they are late. When it's raining, the attendance is poor. (Senior manager)

Flexible use of technology as a means of addressing the lack of in-person contact

The possibility of using technology to support flexible learning provision to overcome the lack of in-person contact is showcased through descriptions of emergency remote teaching (ERT) strategies adopted by the institution during lockdown regulations following the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, in one ERT strategy, the senior manager described how the college's zero-rated website was utilised in combination with the messaging platform, WhatsApp, to deliver content.

We opened a portal on our college website, which we zero-rated, so the challenge of our learners obviously is data. Eventually it started to work very well because what we realized was, in WhatsApp, you can send messages which doesn't take a lot of data, then you can direct the learners to the website and tell them 'listen, there's a voice note for you on what you need to do today for 10 minutes and the learners can, free of charge, listen to the

voicemail. So I think the two – initially we separated them – but, after a while the two actually started to work very well together. (Manager)

Flexible use of radio broadcasts and other media to support the lack of in-person contact

Another creative strategy employed during ERT was the college's partnership with a local radio station to broadcast live sessions and then follow up via other media for queries from students. While the main language of the radio station was Sesotho, the lessons were broadcast in English.

We partnered with a local radio station. We've got two radio stations, but there is one which covers a bigger area in terms of radius, so we partnered with that and we were giving a few lessons through the radio. Lecturers were there live, offering those lessons, and then thereafter they'll make follow ups through WhatsApp and other means. (Senior manager)

Delivery of paper-based materials to central locations

During ERT, for students who did not have the means to access the online content, paper-based learning materials were delivered to central locations, such as post offices and police stations, where students could collect them at times convenient to them.

Learners even came to us saying that they don't have phones or they don't have any means. Then we also put the notes on whatever we had . . . We tried to leave them in central places like post offices and police stations and learners picked them up. (Manager)

These strategies point towards the possibilities for creatively using multiple delivery platforms and media to extend learning beyond face-to-face provision.

Retrieval system of used textbooks unsuccessful as a means to alleviate material costs

The COVID-19 context has also prompted considerations for use of teaching materials other than textbooks. Prior to the pandemic, the college primarily relied on textbooks as the prime teaching materials. The institution pays for the textbooks and the senior manager described these as being costly. As a result, the college proposed, and attempted, to implement a retrieval system, which entailed students returning their used textbooks in exchange for some economic gain. However, the system failed to work as students were not keen to return their textbooks for several reasons, including the need to consult the previous year's textbooks given the continuation of their courses.

Fully copyrighted materials a barrier to flexible learning

During the COVID-19 pandemic, with full copyright licences attached to textbooks hindering the sharing of textbook content online, lecturers were prompted to search for alternative

materials online including open access articles available via Google Scholar and other openly licenced educational materials.

One of the questions is copyright, obviously, because it came up during the lockdown. You can't just upload a publisher's book ... So I think that was one of the things that limited us from using the textbooks that we bought if I can put it that way. There's a lot of online material that is open source that's available in different programs. I think a lot of lectures realized this when they started compiling lessons at home. When they started using Google Scholar ... they saw there were online materials that you can use. (Manager)

This points towards the possibilities of open educational resources and open access articles, which are free and openly licenced as a way to overcoming the legal constraints of fully copyrighted materials and economic barriers associated with their purchase.

Discussion

Flexible learning as culturally affirmative, but economically maldistributive for students

The case of Goldfields TVET College demonstrates how flexible learning provision may be used as a means to address cultural injustices stemming from the traditional education model by providing students a second opportunity to succeed through the intervention programme. Yet, this chance to succeed a second time around comes at a cost. No longer qualifying for NSFAS funding, these students must repeat the subjects at their own cost. In this way, although the flexible learning provision opens up the opportunity to succeed given another chance, it also places constraints on who may be at liberty to pay for this second chance. In this sense, success comes with an economic cost and, arguably, furthers the divide between those who can afford education and those who cannot. It thus furthers economic maldistribution as education and, by implication, job opportunities, are still strongly tied to economics. The intervention, as such, can be described as 'affirmative', as while it provides students a second chance at success, this is only for some students (those who can afford the additional cost) and not all students. Moreover, it does not address the root causes of the failure rate in the first instance.

The high failure rate in the mainstream programme suggests that a more appropriate intervention may be for the college to interrogate the reasons for the failure. A possible reason for failure in the mainstream programme may well be the didactic model of teaching in which teachers are positioned as disseminators of knowledge and students are receivers of knowledge. The success within the intervention programme suggests that the 'flipped classroom' model, where students engage with the learning tasks within their own time, and classroom time is left for interrogating, discussing and dealing with questions, seems to be producing engaged students who are able to take more control of their learning. This pedagogical approach appears to be more inclusive, as it allows students to construct their own knowledge and learning, with teachers acting more as facilitators in this process. In this way, the opportunity to succeed in the intervention programme can be described as 'culturally transformative' as it affords students the opportunity to engage with a different pedagogical model rather than a mere second chance at success.

Flexible learning as economically affirmative for students and the TVET college

The college's response during the COVID-19 pandemic to supporting ERT points towards the possibilities of flexible learning provision to address some economic injustices. At the individual level, the flexible approach to providing content delivery, from online platforms, to radio broadcasts, to dropping off materials at physical destinations, point towards the possibilities of flexibility of provision to circumvent transport poverty. The implications can be significant as the case study reveals that transport poverty is not only a barrier to class attendance (and performance by implication), but, importantly, it can have grave consequences in relation to personal safety. It is important to note that while the findings indicate that flexible modes of delivery may be a means to addressing the issue of transport poverty and threats to personal safety, other costs can be generated in the process such as costs related to data and electricity consumption. In relation to data costs, zero-rating the college's website during the ERT period has proved to be effective in overcome this barrier. This suggests that, in alleviating economic injustice, flexible modes of provision are not enough, but interventions must be in place to support access to and success in the mode of provision.

At the institutional level, the move away from textbooks to the use of open educational resources during the pandemic points towards the possibility of freeing the college from having to carry the financial burden of providing students with textbooks. However, there were obviously costs that the college had to bear in relation to printing materials and transport costs to deliver these to central points as well as the invisible costs of lecturers locating and selecting open access journal articles and open educational resources.

Flexible learning as culturally affirmative, but politically exclusionary

The case of Goldfields TVET College suggests that the ideals of open learning and the notion of flexible learning provision can be undermined when the assessment policy does not correspond accordingly. Arguably, by requiring students in the intervention programme to write assessments at the same time as the full-time students, this is likely to constrain the pace of their learning and their readiness to be assessed. In other words, while students may pace themselves in their own time, they are still obliged to work within a particular time frame, because of the fixed assessment deadlines. Flexibility, in this sense, is only an ameliorative means of overcoming time, pace and place (issues that problematises the traditional education approach) as opposed to a transformative response, where students are given the decision-making power of the time, pace and place of their learning and assessment.

Flexible learning as politically constrained for students, lecturers and the institution

Furthermore, the interview with the manager suggests an injustice arising from political misrepresentation of the policies that govern TVET colleges as those who are directly affected by the policies (lecturers and students) are not given a voice in the design of policies or practices. In this case, it would appear that the assessment policy is constraining the

support that institutional management feels it can provide in fully realising the open learning vision as set out in the OLPF.

Conclusion

This chapter examined how flexible learning manifests as a principle within DHET's (2017) OLPF and investigated how the principle is being applied in the case of Goldfields TVET College. Fraser's theory of social justice has been drawn on as a conceptual framework to understand how the flexible interventions can enable or inhibit social justice. The findings indicate that the college's intervention programme addresses cultural justice by providing students a second opportunity at success. Economically, however, given that NSFAS funding does not provide support for repeating students, the intervention is only accessible to those who can afford the fees. This is an example of 'imbrication' (Fraser, 2004, p. 1115), where dimensions of social justice are intricately entangled. In essence, the intervention is an affirmative response as flexible learning, as a form of open learning, still functions within a system in which education is firmly tied to personal finances.

Beyond the intervention programme, the college has shown, through its flexible approach to disseminating content during the ERT period instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic, that diverse modes of provision can assist in addressing transport poverty. The chapter has highlighted the significant consequences of transport poverty – affecting not only quality of learning, but, importantly, personal safety.

Paradoxically, the findings suggest that although diverse modes of provision can assist in overcoming one form of poverty, they can also heighten poverty in other ways, depending one's ability to access the provision. Data costs, for instance, can be an obstacle for learners in accessing online modes of provision. The chapter thus proposes that, along with diverse modes of provision, interventions that support access to modes of provision must also be in place to fully realise the potential of flexible learning. In relation to teaching resources, the findings indicate that the financial burden which TVET colleges have to carry in supplying students with textbooks can be mitigated through the use of open educational resources.

Lastly, from a political perspective, the chapter has highlighted the need for assessment policies to be recalibrated to reflect the principle of flexible learning. It has been argued that there is political misrepresentation in the current policy practice in which those who are directly affected by the policies are not given a 'voice' in policy deliberations, or the agency to make changes that suit the specific context.

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