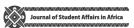Reflective practice

Disability Unit Practitioners at Stellenbosch University: Covid-19 Pandemic Reflections

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Abstract

As reflective practitioners working in disability inclusion, we constantly work with shifting realities concerning our students, who are not a homogenous group. The coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) was a reality least expected in 2020, yet we used our flexible approach to make the transition as smooth as we possibly could. The Disability Unit (DU) is one of five units located within the Centre for Student Counselling and Development at Stellenbosch University (SU) and falls within the responsibility centre of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning. The DU was founded in 2007 and is 15 years old in 2021. We aim to foster disability inclusion within a transformative framework at SU, with our main focus on students with disabilities. Our wider aim is universal access, which includes working towards the removal of cultural, social, language and disability barriers in the higher education context. We are guided by the Disability Access Policy (2018) of SU. Since the latter part of March 2020, we had to shift to online teaching and learning. This came at a time when we were preparing for the end of the term and student support was being put in place. The onset of Covid-19 occasioned unanticipated reflections and challenges, which we share in this article. We also reflect on what we have learnt and how we can move forward in a changed academic environment catapulted into a digital world. We do this reflection by following the Gibbs' reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1988) which offers a way to reflect and learn from experience. The cycle is weaved into the reflections as it follows a process of describing the context of the DU, expressing how the Covid-19 pandemic was felt by staff and students, evaluating and learning from what was experienced. According to Lyner-Cleophas (2020), online learning has benefits and challenges, especially considering students with disabilities.

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Introduction and Contextualising the Disability Unit

The Stellenbosch University (SU) Vision 2040 (SU, 2018a) and Disability Access Policy (SU, 2018b) echo the values that underpin the work of the DU. Excellence, compassion, accountability, respect and equity are the values that inform our vision at SU. We hereby aim for an enabling environment for our students and the systemic disability inclusion of staff and students, although our focus is chiefly on students. We managed to pursue these values during the pandemic.

The DU had approximately 462 students who had indicated a disability on application to SU in 2020. While this is the number of students who disclosed a disability, those who seek support is far greater, totalling approximately 768 students in all years of study that were receiving support in 2020 (SU, 2020d). At times, students are known to not disclose a disability, or they do not view their difficulties as a disability.

A wide range of students with disabilities are seen at SU. These include students with physical or sensory disabilities such as deaf, blind and visually impaired students, chronically ill students and students with neurological difficulties. Mental health conditions that require support also fall into this category.

The types of support that students receive at SU can include extended time on tests and examinations, the use of a computer to write examinations (the main means of communication during Covid-19) and the use of scribes or readers (mainly electronic means are used, such as JAWS, ZoomText and Read & Write).

The Biopsychosocial Model of Disability espoused by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) confirms that people with disabilities are not one-dimensional. No two students with the same disability are the same. General functioning, biological, psychological, social and political factors, education, health and economics include elements important to consider when students come to university. Psychological and emotional realities are highlighted by Watermeyer and Swartz (2008) as is the impact of the broader social and physical context by Oliver (2009).

Context is clearly important, and the nature of the disability and its manifestation impact various areas of life. A student with a disability will therefore be impacted by what is occurring in broader society and will have psychological and emotional responses to events, whether at domestic, national or international level, like all other students. On a personal level, students with disabilities experience more anxiety than students without, depending on the nature of their disability.

The Disability Access Policy is of relevance to SU as a whole. This means that disability inclusion on campus is the responsibility of everybody on campus and not only of the DU.

Our General Response to Covid-19

Just as we were rounding off the first term at SU, the Covid-19 pandemic was thrust upon us (SU, 2020a). We were finalising our students' academic support plans and test and examination concessions, putting in place assistive technologies (hardware and software) and ensuring funding in accordance with students' specific financial and other support needs when the pandemic struck. Staff and students were asked to vacate their offices, classrooms, laboratories, libraries and residences at SU. This was an anxiety-provoking and uncertain time for staff and students. Our most vulnerable students became more anxious during this time, and we needed to acknowledge and respond to the vulnerability, as well as contain our emotions and experiences of the pandemic.

The South African government, SU and global organisations such as the United Nations (UN, 2020) issued notices and policy briefs that care should be shown to the most vulnerable people in society during this time. It was expected that inequalities would be exacerbated during this time and that the educational sector would not be spared.

Our main response was to provide continued support to students with disabilities through Emergency Remote Teaching, Learning and Assessment (ERLTA). While ERTLA was a challenge for some students and staff, learning took place for all.

South African Realities

The Department of Higher Education in South Africa acknowledges the barriers that exist in the post-school sector for people with disabilities and describes ways in which these obstacles can be overcome, but in broad policy terms only. Even though this national disability framework is contested (Ngubane-Mokiwa, Mutanga & Bothwell, 2018), it nonetheless provides a foundation to build on. Emphasis is placed on the digital economy and assistive devices and how these add to the support to students with disabilities.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the inequalities in Africa (UN, 2020). Inequalities were witnessed at SU too, but these could mostly be sorted out through negotiations between students and SU despite initial South African government guidelines and policies. For example, it was easy for certain students to go home at short notice when asked to do so but more challenging for those who experienced funding restraints and had to travel long distances. Taking national or international flights home was not an easy option.

Most students commute to campus daily and stay on campus to have access to Wi-Fi and data given the existing infrastructural networks, particularly when access at their homes is non-existent or their circumstances are not conducive to study. A few students with disabilities did stay in Stellenbosch, in either private or SU residences during this time. They had to adjust to being isolated from other students and staff during the hard lockdown and to only focus on their studies. To the students who stayed behind, they felt that they were in a hard lockdown throughout the varying levels of the pandemic, as they were restricted to their residences. All safety and social distancing precautions determined by the South African government had to be adhered to.

Academic Support and Counselling Online

The ERTLA was instituted to include all students in the online environment and to facilitate successful study (SU, 2020b). This developed to the extent that during the second semester, further student engagement was put in place. This included online tutors, flexible assessment practices, and a mentor programme for certain modules, additional online assessments and assignments, increased consultation time and increased synchronous and asynchronous teaching activities.

Accessibility in ERTLA developed well since the start of the lockdown, and flexibility was introduced. While students initially only received a PowerPoint presentation or a voice recording explaining the PowerPoint, it helped, especially deaf students, to have the recordings converted into text for better access. Deaf students who used South African Sign Language as a first language found that their interpreters could establish a workable online medium to explain presentations sent to them by their lecturers. They also did online assessments with Sign Language interpretation.

Sufficient data, access to devices, good bandwidth and electricity access became additional matters to contend with, particularly during the first semester. Lecturers had to find ways to do assessments in an inclusive manner. Many found universal extra time measures to be a good solution to connectivity issues, and this benefitted all students. They felt at ease that they would have sufficient time to complete assignments and assessments. Additional extra time during online assessments was granted where this was approved by SU, also through an online process.

Academic support consultations took place via MS Teams, WhatsApp, telephone and Zoom. We were very flexible in our response to students during this time, providing psychosocial support as well as academic counselling as needed to students with disabilities. Most students had adjusted by the end of the second term.

Collaboration-Enhanced Flexibility

When students left campus, they increasingly experienced data constraints and problems with hardware. This was largely addressed by agreements between SU and technology service providers, telecom companies such as Mweb, Cell-C and Vodacom, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and the Department of Higher Education and Training. The University developed various work streams, including the teaching and learning work stream. Training of lecturers took place during April, and students were given further guidance on how to access teaching and learning material on their learning management system called SUNLearn. Specific information was also shared with the focus on students with disabilities, such as how to apply for test and examination concessions and how extra time would work online (SU, 2020b). In the teaching and learning work stream, there was Student Representative Council representation, including a special needs manager. This student had a visual disability and worked very closely with the DU and the teaching and learning work stream, providing pertinent information on students' experiences during the pandemic, which informed better practices.

Some students with neurodevelopmental disabilities, for whom the lack of structure made it hard to adapt to the home environment, found the transition to ERTLA disruptive. This created increased anxiety. Classes were not always at set times and recordings of lectures were often sent later, which made it hard for students to manage their time and develop their own programme. However, students who experienced social anxiety often found this transition to be easier as they did not have to contend with the anxiety around interactions and the big classroom spaces of SU. Some students with psychosocial difficulties could also adjust their day according to their sleep pattern (Widnall, 2020).

Phased-in Return of Students

In a measured and cautious manner, a third of students were allowed to return to campus around mid-year but in an online way as far as possible, including practical and research-based course work. The necessary physical distancing and hygiene measures were in place. Returning to the various campuses was done in phases and under controlled circumstances. Firstly, the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences welcomed its final-year students back to the Tygerberg campus. After this, final-year students who had to be on campus for research purposes, practical sessions and laboratory work or who were experiencing extreme difficulties at home could return to our main campus.

The return of the remaining two-thirds of students commenced at the start of writing this article and was instituted from 1 September. Detailed plans for students had not been implemented, except that the ERTLA support mechanism process was to continue in most faculties. Certain students with disabilities were requested, by invitation, to return to campus as they were struggling in the online environment to adapt to coursework, which they found useful. Additionally, if students struggled in the home environment, they could return to residences while still adhering to the necessary social distancing and hygiene regulations.

Financial Support

In South Africa, no specific ring-fenced funding for students with disabilities is built into subsidies to universities. Students in the low-income brackets can source funding through the NSFAS, a government funding scheme that ensures access to funds for tuition, accommodation, meals, books, living costs, and assistive technology and support.

When the pandemic struck, the NSFAS decided that all students receiving funding would receive laptops. This came after SU had already embarked on a drive to ascertain which students needed data and devices such as laptops to continue their studies online. About 1 500 SU students received laptops. These are on loan to students and if returned will not be charged against their student account at the end of lockdown. Those who do not return the laptop will be charged for it at the end of lockdown. The NSFAS offered to pay such charges for any NSFAS-funded student who borrowed a laptop from universities and wished to keep it after 2020. During these difficult times, all NSFAS-funded students received their full food allowances, book allowances and accommodation fees for the year,

bearing in mind that SU did cost adjustments for students who left campus and were not using campus services such as residences on campus. A payment relief agreement was made.

However, students with annual family incomes above R600 000 South African rands do not have access to funding from NSFAS. The importance of private sector funds as an adjunct to funding in the disability sector in the post-school sector cannot be emphasised enough, given this context.

Additionally, the DU receives private sector funding from First National Bank, one of the biggest banks in South Africa. Through the FirstRand Foundation that manages the bank's corporate social investment projects, it supports a range of sectors, such as education. SU is one of the beneficiaries of such funding. The DU had built in a large contingency fund with the FirstRand Foundation to cover any unexpected expenses incurred by students with disabilities. This was invaluable as requests that arose during the pandemic were for extra tutoring in the online environment, extra data for tutors and students, and assistance with an internet package to enable academic work off campus. The funding provided by the FirstRand Foundation allowed us to provide a mentor who helped to support students during lockdown. To have a fellow student with a disability check in with a FirstRand-funded student was invaluable as students often felt isolated and confused during this time. Both the NSFAS and First National Bank were flexible about support during the pandemic.

The Michael and Susan Dell Foundation was an additional funder that enabled support in the online environment (SU, 2020c), and this funding was only procured during ERTLA.

Course Workload Adaptations

Many students reported an increase in workload during the off-campus and online work period. At times students became overwhelmed by the heavy workload and this added much stress to their already stressed lives. The University gave students a chance to deregister from study modules with no negative consequences during the first semester, and these modules could be resumed in the new academic year in 2021. This provided much relief to many students, although some were uncertain about this due to not knowing how long the pandemic would last. We provided academic counselling to a few students with disabilities who were at risk of deregistering entirely. In most cases, we managed to assist them with lightening their course load so that they did not deregister completely but rather staggered their course load by deregistering for some subjects and focusing on those that they could cope with. Some students with learning disabilities experienced increased anxiety, and they opted for this solution as well.

Assistive Technology in the Online Environment

The use of technology became increasingly universal for all students in the online environment (SU, 2020b). Support measures were put in place to assist students with online learning. Through long-time collaboration between the DU and HUMARGA (an SU computer user area for students in the humanities), specialist knowledge regarding assistive

technology is shared and students are generally adequately supported in this way. Many students with disabilities were already acquainted with assistive technologies as an adjunct to the technology generally used by all students, such as computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones. Assistive technology commonly used for reading, assignments and assessments at SU includes JAWS, Zoom Text and Read & Write (Lyner-Cleophas, 2019). Students are very grateful for this relatively easy access to assistive technology support. It provides invaluable academic support and allows for better access to academic material, in line with our policy of improving access to students with disabilities, which is not only physical but also regarding information.

About 49 students used the services of the Resource Office at the DU in 2020 where learning material is adapted. Staff here also source e-books. Despite the shift off campus, material could still be adapted, although the channel of distribution to the students shifted to OneDrive and Dropbox. Since the students had assistive technology available on their personal computers, they could continue to study independently. For example, a blind student studying theology is continuing his Biblical Hebrew studies with his tutor using Skype meetings and pre-recorded lectures. His learning material in Braille is made available in an electronic format that he can read on his electronic Braille display. He would not have been able to continue his Biblical Hebrew studies without this technology as it was impossible to produce hardcopy Braille material during lockdown.

Certain platforms such as SUNLearn, MS Teams and Zoom are a challenge to navigate with assistive technology such as screen readers and Braille displays. Some students needed extra training before they were able to take part in discussions, access learning material and complete assessments.

Assessments in the Online Environment and Adaptations

Students with disabilities in particular were anxious about how they would be able to link up to classes once the new term started in April 2020 and do their assessments, particularly in cases where they received scribes and extra time as support when on campus. Online quizzes were formative ways to assess students' knowledge in certain areas of work. Concerns were raised by students about being granted extra time for these quizzes.

For the most part, the online quizzes worked well and lecturers could make individual adaptations to students' quiz time. During the June 2020 examinations, all students were granted examination paper downloading time of mainly five minutes and uploading time of mainly thirty minutes after they had completed their papers. This allowed for any internet uploading and downloading difficulties that students might have experienced during the examination starting and completion process – universal extra time was allowed for the technological processes to be completed. However, there were lecturers who were not aware of this concession or forgot to provide extra time. Some lecturers also thought that the extra uploading and downloading time would be sufficient for those students with disabilities who already qualified for extra time. Such students, however, needed extra time additional to the extra uploading and downloading time granted to all. Where such

uncertainties emerged, lecturers made the necessary allowances. Lecturers also had to learn how to adjust extra time for quizzes as this form of formative assessment was often used during ERTLA.

Test and Examination Concessions: Background

In line with the SU policy for inclusivity regarding assessments, we have a well-established process in place whereby students can apply for test and examination concessions depending on their specific disability. During ERTLA, the process to apply for concessions at SU shifted to a fully electronic system where applications for test and exam concessions were worked through on an MS Teams group and where applications could only be sent to skryftyd@sun.ac.za and the option to hand in a hardcopy was eliminated. Most buildings were closed with most staff members working online and off campus.

The Extra Writing Time Committee could not meet physically, but the members sent their comments via an electronic system to each other for approval. Once approved, the specific concessions were loaded onto the examination system. However, official letters could not be printed for students to collect at offices, due to their closure during this time. Confirmation of extra writing time letters were thus emailed to students and faculty support officers informed lecturers that the extra writing time and other concessions had been loaded onto the class lists. The practice of loading of the concessions that students are granted has been in place for a few years. An awareness already exists on the part of lecturers about specific concessions to students, and they ensure that the necessary support is put in place, such as enlarged test papers, extra writing time, writing in a separate venue and electronic question papers due to students' using screen readers to read the papers.

During level 3 lockdown, the Examinations Office officials received permission to go to the office to print the concession letters, sign them, and scan and email them to all students who needed these letters. Letters could not be sent via the postal services as these were delayed and students' addresses were not always accurate on the SU system. After the 2020 registration, most students did not receive their updated concession letters for the year. As the Covid-19 lockdown started on 26 March 2020 in South Africa, before most tests were written, students did not have their official SU letters, which caused high anxiety when online quizzes took place when the second term started. In the rush to leave campus, several students who had updated their letters for 2020 left their letters at their residences.

Numerous applications for concessions were received for the June examinations as students became anxious regarding the impact that ERTLA was having on their studies. Online assessments made students anxious too. If an assessment that stretched over a few days was given to students, extra time was normally not granted because it was not as time pressured as a one-, two- or three-hour assessment. Universal granting of extra time was practised by a few faculties as an accommodation measure during this time.

Student Appointments in the Disability Unit

Students would usually come to our offices physically to make an appointment. Some students might have been reluctant to make an appointment due to social stigma or other

anxieties around being seen at the Centre for Student Counselling and Development where the DU is situated. Approaching a disability support facility could also be construed as stigmatising to some students. During ERTLA, students could make appointments for virtual sessions via email to a generic disability@sun.ac.za email address or contact us individually. We had updated information sent by SU regularly for students to access support services, and contact details were very clear. We had regular contact with new and existing (pre–Covid-19) students. Office phone numbers were diverted to staff members' cell phone numbers and Skype for Business. Many used MS Teams as well for calls. This provided a degree of anonymity and a less exposed way of engaging with staff about their disability. In the online space, nobody would see students walking to our offices and this brought a measure of comfort to hesitant students who see our services or their disability as stigmatised.

The Disability Unit: Work-Life Balance

One of the five values of the SU Vision 2040 is compassion and respect for staff and students. Not only students but also the staff who supported them had to manage their workload and time in their home environments, which often had their own dynamics, especially when children were also not attending school and had to receive home schooling.

Staff members generally structured their day to ensure work-life balance. Flexibility and not being too hard on oneself were important for wellness and self-care. Setting small goals, taking regular breaks, practising self-discipline, doing reflection and obtaining spiritual nurturance while ensuring that national lockdown rules were observed were a challenge but kept staff members balanced and well. As for students, internet connectivity, suitable hardware and load shedding were realities that had to be dealt with.

Conclusion and Learnings

We learnt that being an effective student or worker does not restrict one to the confines of an office or a lecture hall. Flexibility emerged as a big driver for effective work and study and could be considered as an important factor in a post–Covid-19 environment given resource pressures and constraints and the holistic wellness of staff and students.

Once data and devices had been acquired or upgraded, staff could continue to function online. Students were engaged via email, WhatsApp, telephone, cell phone, Zoom and Microsoft Teams, in most instances.

A hybridised mode of working, learning and assessment is possible given our diversity. Universal extra time is possible and all students benefit from it for various reasons, and given their diverse learning needs. This has been inadvertently tested as students with specific disabilities who had difficulty with class attendance, have previously asked for recorded lectures or podcasts, and this was never deemed possible. Now we know that students can get access to lecture material in various ways. Our systemic and collaborative way of working with students with disabilities has been and will continue to be strengthened.

A new student management system, SUNStudent, is being developed and will enhance students' online presence and enable better access for all. This online system has been put to

the test in many ways, including our test and examination concessions application processes, and will be incorporated into the student data management system.

Tele-counselling and tele-consulting constituted additional learning for us. We used all means possible to continue to reach our students. Many students already use email as their main means of communication. This was strengthened during ERTLA.

In Future

While most of what could be implemented is sustainable, we will need to think about aspects that are not, such as the data that was accessible to students during the pandemic. While it might not be possible to continue to provide data for off-campus classes, the hybrid way of working can ensure that students can access good bandwidth through their computer user areas, as done prior to the onset of the pandemic. Recorded classes or podcasts can be downloaded when on campus and be viewed data-free when at home, where there are bandwidth and data challenges.

We were afforded a chance to expand our means of communicating with our students, and in so doing reaching more students. In certain cases, students are more comfortable communicating via digital communication due to the stigma of disability and wanting to be less visible. We also became more aware of the protection of personal information in the online environment, regarding academic support and counselling sessions and students expressing their difficulties. The Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) will come into force in July 2021. We will need to ensure that information that should be protected is indeed protected in the increasingly digital environment and broaden access to students using our services through securing privacy for those who prefer this means of communication with our services in student affairs.

We will continue to work in a hybrid fashion with less staff presence in the office and more staff working from home. Our students will still be served effectively in a hybrid way of support, and we will meet with those whom we need to either virtually or face to face in the office and depending on their preferences for privacy. Ongoing reflection on the hybrid way of working will take place during the coming months and years.

Assistive technology and accessible information are two crucial elements that we have seen enhance student engagement with our services as well as teaching, learning and assessment. We need to ensure that no students are excluded from support services due to not having this access in place. We will continue to liaise with funding partners like we have been over many years and prior to the establishment of the DU in 2007, to continue to assist students with appropriate and updated technologies.

Ongoing collaboration with stakeholders on campus, but especially the private sector, is important in the digital educational environment. Assistive technologies (software and hardware) and access to data are strong enablers for the success of our students and how we render services. We will continue to strengthen this as we build and expand our support services.

Research Ethics

This is a reflective piece of writing, and all reflections are those of the relevant staff members from the DU. No ethics approval was needed for this reflection on Covid-19 and support for students with disabilities from the vantage point of the DU at SU.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest arose in the writing of this reflective piece as the authentic voices of staff members and their experiences emerged.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article reflect the experiences of staff members working at the DU at SU.

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