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Building a sustainable and democratic future in rural South African higher education institutions

Abstract

While higher education is crucial for the development of ideals and skills necessary for democratic societies to take root and prosper, higher education institutions' missions have been tested during this time of uncertainty. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the instabilities and disparities in global higher education by exacerbating profound social fractures and long-standing structural imbalances. As such, the study examined how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected rural higher education institutions in building a sustainable and democratic future. It also examined students and staffs' perspectives on how these higher education institutions responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in building a resilient, inclusive and democratic culture. Informed by an interpretivist paradigm, the study utilised a qualitative research approach and a case study design. Data were collected at two rural universities from university managers, lecturers and students using interviews. The study's findings revealed that while the Covid-19 pandemic represents a time of survival of the fittest, which also strengthened democratic tenets and revolutionised the higher education sector, the pandemic has revealed pre-existing institutional issues and vulnerabilities in rural higher education institutions. Research findings also revealed that the pandemic has also spotlighted the poor and the most vulnerable in society as rural HEIs endeavoured to build resilience, and an inclusive and democratic culture to stay sturdy in the face of the 'new normal' and emerge stronger from the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the study's findings, it was concluded that building a resilient, inclusive and democratic culture at HEIs could generate success for higher education institutions by influencing students' career opportunities and employment readiness, amongst many others. We recommend that HEIs consider focusing more on equity and inclusion; reinforce capacities for risk management at all levels of the system; strong leadership and coordination; and enhance consultation and communication mechanisms.

Keywords: *Covid-19 pandemic; democratic culture; higher education, sustainable development, transformation.*

1. Introduction and background

Since their inception, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been the centres of socio-economic and environmental transformation (Filho *et al.* 2017; Awuzie & Abuzeinab, 2019). In addition, HEIs are known for their strong influence

on community sustainability and a diverse cultural orientation that is achieved through the three related pillars of teaching and learning, research, and community service (Armeanu, Vintilă & Gherghina, 2018). Through these three university pillars, the global community is expected to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda that will see an improved quality of life in all aspects of human endeavour (Awuzie & Abuzeinab, 2019; UN, 2020). The commitment to ensuring equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, underscored by SDG number 4 (UN, 2020), has broadened the role HEIs are expected to play. The socio-economic inequalities that characterise different geographical spaces also pose a great threat to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. There is a lot of evidence that most HEIs, especially those in marginalised rural areas, are constrained in their operations, owing to resource limitations and poor local, regional and international networking (Marta, Susana & Miranda, 2018). The glaring inequalities among HEIs and communities in which they are situated were further exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, an epic crisis. The pandemic has affected every facet of human function, not sparing the global higher education sector. The abrupt lockdown measures that restricted people's movement and consequently led to the loss of freedom have had profound implications on the proper functioning of HEIs. Despite the effects of the pandemic, HEIs were expected to be resilient in fulfilling their functions; hence a shift in paradigm in teaching, research and community engagement was unavoidable. While several studies focused on how HEIs have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic (Mittal *et al.*, 2020; Fasae, Adekoya & Adegbilero-Iwari, 2020; Martzoukou, 2020), this study explored how HEIs in rural ecologies were affected in their teaching for sustainability and democracy. It also examined how the institutions reacted to maintain their expected roles in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.   Literature review

2.1 Rural higher education institutions' response to the Covid-19 pandemic

The devastating repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic brought a 'new normal' in the functioning of HEIs so that a sustainable and democratic life is achieved. The pandemic, in a way, provided a unique opportunity to assess HEIs' capacity to respond to changes in the external environment, and to be a learning organisation in the service of addressing significant social challenges (Reimers & Marmolejo, 2020; Olawale *et al.*, 2021). The pandemic saw HEIs adapting to new modes of teaching and learning, research and community engagement. In line with the World Health Organisations' guidelines on the Covid-19 pandemic, HEIs responded by downsizing workers and students in offices and lecture rooms, respectively, and also resorting to virtual graduation ceremonies (Maitanmi *et al.*, 2021; Reimers & Marmolejo, 2020; Mncube, Mutongoza & Olawale, 2021). In their community service programmes, some universities were involved in producing and distributing Covid-19 test kits, vaccines, and personal protective equipment (PPE) (Reimers & Marmolejo, 2020).

The HEIs fulfilled their role of socio-economic sustainability through knowledge generation and dissemination; as such, the research focus was diverted to issues about the mitigation of the pandemic effects. In addition, digital platforms have become more dominant as means of data generation, owing to Covid-19 guidelines that restrict face-to-face interactions. A shutdown of HEIs meant that the traditional face-to-face mode of instruction ceased; yet learners were supposed to cover their semester work. The present Covid-19 crisis has therefore revolutionised the entire higher education architecture of most HEIs the world over through

e-tools for teaching and learning, since there was no other option for the continuation of the academic activities (Dutta, 2020). Some institutions resorted to using social-media platforms to disseminate learning resources to students, despite challenges faced by institutions in different geographical locations (Dutta, 2020).

The fast transition into the digital era caught HEIs unprepared, resulting in glaring deficiencies in implementation, especially in the disadvantaged rural spaces. As a result of institutional unpreparedness, a rush for educators and student's induction to digital platforms ensued. On the one hand, the use of digital platforms to varying degrees depended on the location of particular institutions (Howshigan & Nadesan, 2021; Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). On the other hand, the Covid-19 crisis can be viewed as a catalyst for change, owing to the transition into the digital era that would have taken a long time, due to bureaucracies and general resistance to change (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). While this can be true of most urban HEIs, the same is not happening with the poorer rural HEIs. The rural HEIs' response to the effects of the pandemic is constrained by the scarcity of resources (Agormedah *et al.*, 2020). The shift to online digital platforms means a widening digital divide that leaves rural institutions far from achieving the SDGs for their communities (Mhandu, Mahiya & Muzvidziwa, 2021). Some rural HEIs have managed to prepare their staff for online learning, but could not connect with their students who live in remote areas because of the lack of access to fast, affordable and reliable internet connections (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). As such, most rural HEIs adopted a blended learning system to ameliorate the inadequacies of digital learning (Agormedah *et al.*, 2020). Notwithstanding the challenges faced, high academic standards are required for HEIs to produce high-quality teaching outputs and graduates (Howshigan & Nadesan, 2021). The HEIs' adaptation to digital technologies confirms their role as centres of societal transformation for sustainability and democracy.

2.2 Role of higher education in building a sustainable and democratic culture

The global community strives to meet democratic ideals, as this has become a standard for quality life in contemporary societies. It is believed that if all citizens are allowed to take part in an issue affecting them, quality decisions can be made for the sustainability of institutions and society at large (Dahlum & Knutsen, 2017; German Youth Institute, 2021). Given their role as incubators of knowledge, research leaders and partners to the social and business world that surrounds them, universities play a crucial role in creating a culture for societal sustainability and a culture of democracy in contemporary terms (Dzimi, Fijałkowska & Sułkowski, 2020; Mncube & Olawale, 2021). As centres for transformation, HEIs have a crucial role in creating an environment where democratic ideals can be fostered for socio-economic sustainability. Universities are often viewed as key assets in communities, important resources for advancing democratic principles and strengthening democratic processes (Cooka & Nation, 2016; World Bank Group, 2020). Through teaching for democracy, active and independent participation in research and community engagement, HEIs prepare students for a democratic society (Akins *et al*., 2019). HEIs are also saddled with the responsibilities of creating sustainable communities by fostering democratic ideals, thereby reducing societal inequalities that manifest in the rural urban divide. This is because democratic values allow students to participate actively in their learning through learner-centred approaches and independent research (Bergmark & Westman, 2016); yet the poorer rural HEIs are constrained by a shortage of resources. Currently, students at HEIs are actively engaged in finding solutions to Covid-19 through

research, with those in rural ecosystems likely to have a depleted capacity to engage in research. Universities also contribute more than any other social institution to the development of civil society (Akins *et al.*, 2019). This is evidenced by developing key competencies such as reflective and critical thinking and self-knowledge, which entail self-appraisal processes (Fuertes-Camacho, Dulsat-Ortiz, & Álvarez-Cánovas, 2021). These, coupled with students' involvement with society, can be operationalised through the HEIs' openness to the wider community to engage with and respond to local interests and needs (Dzimi *et al.*, 2020). The responsible citizenry, an aspect of democracy, is shown by participation in issues that affect the community; hence the HEIs' role of preparing students for citizenship through community engagement. These democratic aspects can be fully fostered if the effort is made to address the inequalities between the urban and the disadvantaged HEIs.

3. Theoretical framework: Green theory, citizenship education, and participatory democracy

This study is underpinned by the Green Political Theory developed by Dobson (1980). Since its development in the 1980s and 1990s, the central pillar and key value of this theory has been participatory democracy. This is often associated with grassroots political decision-making, decentralisation and citizen participation in a 'strong democracy' (Barber, 1984), and increasingly with conceptions of deliberative democracy (Dryzek, 2000). According to Peters (2019), the importance of participatory or grass-roots democracy seemed to coincide with growing environmental consciousness, non-violence and concern for social justice. Green politics promote participatory and, more recently, deliberative democracy as a model for open discussion, direct citizen engagement, and an emphasis on grass-roots action above electoral politics (Peters, 2019).

Over a century ago, Dewey (1916), possibly the most ardent advocate of participatory democracy, offered an 'ecological' system based on a sort of Darwinian naturalism that grasped that knowledge originates from the experience of humans in the process of adapting to its environment. Democracy, according to Dewey (1936), is more than just a way of preserving our interests or expressing our uniqueness; it is also a forum for defining our interests. It was above all "an account of democracy as social inquiry that emphasised the importance of discussion and debate as a mechanism of decision-making with the institution of education at its heart" (Peters, 2019: 133).

Dewey's (1916) position on democracy and the distinctive Greens' ethical and political perspective enables us to comprehend the urgency of actual unsustainability and its associated exploitation of people, abuse of the planet, and continued degradation of the non-human world (Barry, 2014). Greens' theory pays close attention to three fundamental issues of deliberative practice, namely control, design and democratic transformation. This may go a long way towards assuring meaningful and successful debate in the face of significant structural inequities and complicated power relations (Barry, 2014; Peters, 2019). The Green theory was relevant for the present study, because it criticises the economic and technological developments that damage nature. As such, Green theory recognises the need for radical change in the world's political structure and takes its stance to challenge the world order to protect the planet from human-caused damage.

4. Statement of the problem

While the Covid-19 pandemic affected both wealthy and poorer nations and interrupted the lives of all groups in society, the impact on students from vulnerable groups may be worse than on the typical student population (Salmi, 2020). This is evident amongst students from disadvantaged groups who have encountered higher hurdles in low-income nations, due to a shortage of resources and more severe capacity restrictions (Salmi, 2020; Mncube *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, prospects for online learning have been severely constrained in nations with limited internet and insufficient broadband capacity, particularly in rural regions (Mncube *et al.*, 2019; Mncube & Olawale, 2020; Salmi, 2020). While the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a major disruption in all sectors and has highlighted the importance of universities in modern society, higher education institutions still need to reflect on the common good and reconsider the marketisation path they have followed in recent decades in order to emerge from the pandemic as more sustainable and inclusive institutions. Hence, the need to examine how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected rural higher education institutions and their reactions in building a resilient, inclusive and democratic culture.

5. Research questions

- How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected higher education institutions' quest to build sustainable and democratic futures?

- How have higher education institutions' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic ensured a more sustainable and democratic future?

6. Research methodology

6.1 Research paradigm

This study is underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm. According to the interpretivist paradigm, the ontological position is reflected in a belief that there are various manifestations of reality, which the researcher constructs. Thus, interpretivism contends that there are no absolute or correct realities (Irene, 2014). Epistemologically, interpretivism posits that the researcher takes on a subject–subject position, where reality and beliefs are intimately connected (Irene, 2014; Olawale, 2021). The methodological approach of the interpretivist holds that knowledge about reality is constructed socially by human actors (Olawale, 2021). As a result, reality is multifaceted, such that researchers can come up with different realities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This paradigm was deemed suitable for this study, because the researchers believe that people make meaning of their existing environment based on their interactions with the world around them. As such, this paradigm will facilitate undertaking an in-depth investigation into how HEIs in the rural context have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in building a more sustainable, equitable and just post-Covid world.

6.2 Research approach

To gain a deeper insight into how HEIs have responded to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, a qualitative research approach was chosen. The use of this approach enabled the researchers to obtain qualitative data, thereby enhancing the systematic investigation of social phenomena in natural environments (Teherani *et al.*, 2015). These phenomena include, but are not limited to how people experience their life, how individuals and/or groups behave, how organisations operate, and how interactions shape relationships (Teherani *et al.*, 2015).

Thus, a qualitative approach was found suitable, because it allows the researchers to study critically how HEIs have responded to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and how these experiences can contribute to building a sustainable and democratic future.

6.3 Research design

The present study employed a case study research design. According to Yin (2014), a case study is a first-hand inquiry that examines a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in greater depth. A case study design also seeks to examine a particular phenomenon within its real, natural setting, especially when the connections and/or limits between the context and the phenomenon are not immediately obvious (Yin, 2014). Thus, a case study design was suitable for this study because of its nature, which explored how rural HEIs have responded to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and how these experiences can contribute to building a sustainable and democratic future. Specifically, the study examined both the phenomenon and the context. As Yin (2014) affirms, case studies are the most appropriate strategy when contextual conditions are relevant to the phenomenon under study; hence, its suitability for the study.

6.4 Population, sample and sampling technique

Population refers to a set of components, cases, or events, whether persons, things, or events, that conform to particular criteria and aims to generalise research conclusions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, the population comprises university managers, lecturers and students at two selected rural higher education institutions in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample for the study. The sample comprised fifteen students, three lecturers, and two managers from each institution, totalling forty participants from the two selected universities. The purposive sampling technique was considered appropriate, because it allowed researchers to hand-pick the cases needed for the sample by making assumptions about their relevance to the study. In that way, researchers could collect and use samples that are pertinent to the topic under study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

6.5 Data collection instrument

A semi-structured interview was utilised to investigate how higher education institutions (HEIs) responded to the Covid-19 pandemic to build a more sustainable and democratic future. As such, semi-structured interviews were held with university managers, lecturers and students on their experience during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The semi-structured interview was found suitable because it allowed researchers to probe for clarification in case of vague or incomplete answers (Datko, 2015). During the data collection process, fifteen university students, three lecturers and two managers were interviewed one-on-one at each university. As such, each in-depth interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes, which was framed by informal conversation and audiotaped.

6.6 Data analysis and trustworthiness

For this study, data collected were analysed thematically using Marshall and Rossman's (2011) analysis procedure, which comprises six steps. The researchers organised the data collected through interviews from different participants following the six steps. After that, the researchers generated themes and patterns, coded the data generated, tested the emergent understanding, and thereafter searched for alternative explanations before writing the full

report with many attempts to minimise the authorial voice, but focus on creating an objective account of meaning as provided by the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

6.7 Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance was sought from the authorities of the participating universities and the issues of anonymity and informed consent were considered for this study. The ethical principles of confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were also preserved, and these principles were discussed and agreed upon before the commencement of data collection. Similarly, all participants' consent to participate in this study was obtained. Before the participants' agreement was requested, they were given information about the research's aims, procedure and data usage. The participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any time, with the data from that respondent not being utilised.

7.   Result and discussion

The present study sought to investigate how higher education institutions (HEIs) have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and their response to building a more sustainable and democratic future. As such, results and discussions were presented under the following sub-headings:

- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on building a sustainable and democratic future in rural HEIs.

- Building resilience, inclusive and democratic culture in HEIs

7.1 Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on building a sustainable and democratic future in rural HEIs

To gather information on how institutions have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic to build a sustainable and democratic future, it is paramount to establish its impact on rural HEIs. As such, participants were asked, "How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your institution in building a sustainable and democratic future?" Research findings revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic represents a time of survival of the fittest, which can also strengthen democratic tenets and revolutionise the higher education. On the other hand, findings revealed that the pandemic has exposed pre-existing institutional issues and vulnerabilities at rural areas' higher education institutions. These vulnerabilities at rural HEIs were evidenced in the teaching and learning practices, managerial role, institutional social life, and psychological preparedness of stakeholders in handling the Covid-19 challenges, amongst many others. For instance, a participant stated,

> The pandemic necessitates that we return home and remain at home all day and night while continuing the learning process in a different learning environment. This had a negative impact on both our interpersonal and intrapersonal lives socially and academically. As a result, the shift from a face-to-face to an online class was not an easy transition for me given that some of my major courses cannot be taught online – this caused a lot of stress, worries, and confusion which eventually had an adverse effect of my marks (Student 8 – University 2).

Similarly, another student added,

> The sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on our academic work and social lives. For example, students like myself who live in the rural community and study in a previously disadvantaged institution like my university do not have quality access to online learning due to limited internet connectivity and the lack of digital infrastructures … As such, it becomes challenging for me to complete my assignment or any given tasks or projects (Student 15 – University 1).

A lecturer who lamented on how the pandemic has affected the teaching and learning practices, as well as the psychosocial wellbeing of the stakeholder, explained,

> The pandemic has necessitated a sudden transformation in the way we teach and assess learning and this has put us as lecturers under a lot of pressure. At that time, we were not trained on using some learning software such as the blackboards, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, etc. … for educational purposes. As such, this caused and, to some degree, still caused considerable stress and uncertainties for both staff and students and increased workloads for the university staff (Lecturer 3 – University 2).

A faculty manager also spoke on how leadership responsibilities have been altered in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. The manager posited,

> … while the pandemic is abrupt, it has put a lot of pressure on the faculty as well as the institutional systems of quality assurance, leadership, and governance. While the majority of staff have complained and requested support during this trying time, we as managers also find it difficult to attend to all the needs of our staff and students while navigating household responsibilities which has blurred boundaries between work and home … this has resulted in me working longer hours, which causes a lot of stress (Manager 2 – University 1).

A faculty manager from University 2 also added,

> Although most universities in the urban region have successfully integrated some form of online learning into their coursework and assessment practices, it has been very challenging and stressful for us in a rural university. As a previously disadvantaged university, we often struggle to meet up with demands from the higher authorities, the training of staff and students towards the transition to online teaching and learning platforms, the development of formal training on software and community of practice through which good practices can be shared, as well as the provision of PPEs and other required support (Manager 1 – University 2).

Research findings revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly stressed education in terms of clarity and responsiveness of communication with the stakeholders, particularly students and staff. While the shift from traditional to online teaching and learning was unavoidable, many students at rural higher education institutions were somehow excluded from learning. Many of them were unable to access online resources due to a lack of infrastructure, poor internet connection, and students' complex mode of communication. Consequently, students' unique study path and the need for individualised attention and support from academic staff and the institution at large were found to be lacking. These findings are in line with the views of Dube (2020), who argues that, typically, rural students often lack access to socio-economic amenities such as quality education, adequate healthcare, transportation, marketing opportunities, and even electricity. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic and the implementation of online learning have exacerbated the challenges faced by rural students and lecturers. The shortage of resources deprived students and lecturers in rural

HEIs of the necessary information, education and skills for community development, self-development and the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic (Mncube, Olawale & Hendricks, 2019; Dube, 2020; Mncube *et al.*, 2021).

From the above research findings, it seems as though the sudden transition to online learning favours urban and affluent students, thereby widening the gap between rich and poor, rather than uniting the nation in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. These findings corroborate those of Dhawan (2020), who argues that the pandemic has created a digital divide that widens inequality gaps. This resulted in students who are less affluent and belong to a less tech-savvy family with financial restrictions, losing out during the sudden transition to an online platform. Thus, Chaturvedi, Vishwakarma and Singh (2021) assert that the Covid-19 outbreak has significantly impacted students' mental health, education and daily routine. However, given the government agencies-imposed measures such as social distancing and travel restrictions, proper consideration was not given to the health implications, as there was no strategy in place to protect against the psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (Chaturvedi *et al.*, 2021; Olawale *et al.*, 2021). This is why Green's theory argues for a deliberative practice in terms of control, design and democratic transformation, which fosters a successful debate in the face of significant structural inequities and complicated power relations (Barry, 2014; Peters, 2019).

7.2 Building resilience, inclusive and democratic culture in HEIs

To elicit information on the sustainability of HEIs in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, participants were asked, "How has your institution responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in building a sustainable and democratic future?" Research findings revealed that while the pandemic has spotlighted the poor and the most vulnerable in the society, rural HEIs endeavoured to build a resilient, inclusive and democratic culture to stay sturdy in the face of the 'new normal' and emerge stronger from the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, rural higher education institutions were able to build and sustain democracy in the face of the pandemic by supporting a democratic ethos, engaging in debates on the future of education and society, and engaging with the lives and problems of students in the community. For instance, a participant stated,

> While the pandemic has erupted in an unexpected form, the only way our university has managed to maintain institutional activities, as well as democratic standards, is by promoting a culture that allows us to engage in various debates with both students and other relevant stakeholders for continued academic activity. This form of engagement is characterised by participation, cooperation, and dedication to public goods, which enables us to make informed decisions with regards to teaching and learning, as well as the institutional management practices" (Manager 3 – University 2).

A similar sentiment was echoed by a lecturer who argued that lecturers, through their respective institutions, have managed to build a sustainable and democratic future amidst the Covid-19 pandemic by infusing democratic principles across all aspects of their teaching and learning activities. For example, a lecturer said,

> While Covid-19 has broadened our views of sustainability, we as lecturers endeavour to create a better Covid-19 experience, as well as a better post-Covid-19 world through the inculcation of democratic values and principles in our online teaching and learning activities … The university has also assisted us through several workshops on how technology can be harnessed for service delivery, all of which allowed us to produce knowledgeable, and educated students for a just and sustainable society (Lecturer 2 – University 1).

In support of the above, a student also stated that,

> … while this academic year has been challenging because of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, my university has been able to sustain its activities by promoting academic freedom and institutional independence, both of which have been critical to the quality of teaching and learning activities, as well as educational research. They have [the university] managed to build a system that requires expanding access to digital learning thereby supporting academic resilience in which we can learn anywhere and at any time. Also, our lecturers have encouraged creative and democratic practices, and have promoted inclusivity in the teaching and learning processes (Student 6 – University 1).

A participant who believed that building a more sustainable and democratic future in the face of unexpected challenges goes beyond the promotion of inclusivity in HEIs to a parade of democratic principles added,

> I believe that the primary goal of a democratic civic university in the face of any unexpected challenges such as that of the Covid-19 outbreak should encompass inclusivity of all stakeholders and demonstration of democratic principles. As such, during the pandemic outbreak, our university promoted the development of standards of academic disciplines and quality, built a resilient education service delivery, harnessed different forms of technology for service delivery, and establish democratic practices in form of openness, transparency, fairness, transparency. This includes working with and contributing to the immediate society in which our university exists (Manager 3 – University 1).

In line with the above, a student added,

> During the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the university has managed to sustain academic activities and build a post-covid-19 environment by making sure that we as students are trained to be democratic citizens who respect the values and principles of democracy such as the freedom of expression and opinion, as well as the freedom of participation in academic matters as well as societal issues emanating from the outbreak of the pandemic (Student 14 – University 2).

From the above responses, research findings revealed that rural HEIs were able to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic by building a resilience, inclusive and democratic culture through the strengthening of an educational system capable of extending accessible digital learning platforms. These findings concur with that of Sarmiento, Ponce and Bertolín (2021) and the World Bank Group (2021), who argue that laying a foundation for green, resilient and inclusive recovery are approaches to responding to uncertainties and planning for future crises. Thus, building a resilient educational service delivery in uncertain times necessitates the expansion of accessible digital learning platforms in institutions as well as investments in information systems to track the enrolment and retention of at-risk students and engage citizens (World Bank Group, 2021; Sarmiento *et al.*, 2021). As such, educators in a resilient system must understand how and endeavour to use distance-learning platforms and tools to reach students in their homes. Similarly, research findings revealed that through the inculcation of democratic norms, encouraging debates that weigh in on education and societal prospects through participation, cooperation and commitment for the public good, are ways in which HEIs have endeavoured to live up to their responsibilities for a sustainable and democratic future. Thus, it is worth noting that for HEIs to fulfil their mandate, democracy should not be constructed theoretically, but should be cultivated as part of the institution's day-to-day operations during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. These findings thus concur with that of Harkavy *et al.* (2021) and Mncube and Olawale (2021), who argue that democratic practices within higher education institutions are a precondition for a fair, inclusive and sustainable

democratic society, and as such, higher education must collaborate through debates about the future of society as well as the future of education. Similarly, Greens' political theory also emphasises collaboration and participatory democracy, which fosters open discussion, direct citizen engagement, and an emphasis on grass-roots action for sustainable development (Peters, 2019). The research therefore suggests that to build a sustainable and democratic future during and post-Covid-19 pandemic, academics, students and their representatives, university administrators, public officials, governmental entities and key stakeholders must collaborate locally, nationally and globally. This will give way for the establishment of civic universities dedicated to the development of fair, respectable, just, equitable, inclusive and sustainable democratic societies (Bergan & Harkavy, 2018; Bergan et al., 2020; Harkavy *et al.,* 2021).

8. Conclusion and recommendation

In this study, we sought to examine how higher education institutions have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in building a sustainable and democratic future. Our results revealed that while HEIs are among the world's predominant establishments serving as a host for advancing and disseminating knowledge and assisting in the development of ethical and capable citizens, the pandemic has created an environment in which socioeconomic changes have an adverse impact on learning in HEIs. However, rural HEIs through resource commitment, defined roles and responsibilities, and the exhibition of democratic norms have been able to maintain resilience and recovery momentum in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this regard, we conclude that in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, resilience is linked to sustainable development because it can generate success for higher education institutions by influencing students' career opportunities and employment readiness. It is noted that the lack of a coordinated mechanism, clear planning guidelines, and institutional mandates reduce efficiencies in building a sustainable and democratic HEIs. In this regard, rural institutions are advised to strive towards a grounded system approach based on a shared vision, commitment, and collaboration of all organisational members in shaping a better, equitable and just post-Covid-19 world. Similarly, given that building a resilient education system positions HEIs to reopening of their doors safely and cope better with future crises, HEIs should consider focusing more on equity and inclusion, reinforcing capacities for risk management at all levels, strong leadership and coordination, enhanced consultation and communication mechanisms.

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