

Inclusiveness of teaching and learning to LGBTIQ individuals during COVID-19 and beyond



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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) has changed teaching and learning activities in several ways. One of the changes is the transition of most higher learning institutions from face-to-face to either blended or fully online modes of teaching and learning. This paper discusses the experiences of LGBTIQ students regarding the inclusiveness of the teaching and learning strategies used during COVID-19 and beyond. The study followed the phenomenography design. Data were collected from sixteen LGBTIQ students in higher education institutions, recruited through the snowballing technique. The analysis was guided by phenomenographic steps of data analysis. The findings indicated variations in safety and access to online education for LGBTIQ individuals. Some viewed COVID-19-induced online teaching and learning as a panacea for their long-standing exclusion from the homo- and transphobic higher education environment. However, to other participants, online education posed more threats to their safety due to cyberbullying related to the increased sharing of contact details, be it WhatsApp numbers or email addresses. Recommendations are made to improve inclusiveness in education for LGBTIQ individuals, focusing on the flexibility of teaching and learning modes in order to meet the needs of diverse student populations while ensuring access and safety.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the inclusiveness of teaching and learning to LGBTIQ individuals during the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) and beyond. The landscape of inclusive teaching and learning has gone through several seriations over the years, with higher education policymakers advocating for equality and easier access to education.¹ The ineffective implementation of policies that promote inclusive teaching in higher education institutions has further marginalised minority groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) communities. The marginalisation of the LGBTIQ community can be considered a form of discrimination against these

¹ Gwen Lawrie et al., “Moving towards Inclusive Learning and Teaching: A Synthesis of Recent Literature,” *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 5, no. 1 (March 29, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.5.1.3>.

groups.² While the LGBTIQ community is already stigmatised by the university community, which usually impacts their access to education. Fields and Wotipka state that the absence in schools and higher education institutions of comprehensive policy frameworks that focus on promoting gender equality and non-discrimination based on sexuality has contributed to the widespread exclusion and institutionalised homophobia experienced by LGBTIQ students.³

Several authors documented that LGBTIQ individuals end up leaving schools without obtaining their qualifications as some of the higher education environments are not inclusive of gender and sexual- diverse individuals, which is evidenced by persistent stigmatisation, discrimination, human rights violation, and other forms of inhumane practices.⁴ The exclusion is also seen in organisational structures such as the sexual binary (either male or female) residence, toilets, sporting codes, and forms. The exposure to the above became an obvious indication of the non-inclusivity of the LGBTIQ community in higher education. Such forms of exclusion made some LGBTIQ students quit school.⁵

The global pandemic brought about by the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has altered teaching and learning as most activities are done online. This creates an assumption that, as the students are not expected to be on campus, as most of the institutions are using digital platforms, LGBTIQ individuals will now be fully included like any other student. However, studies still indicate that some LGBTIQ individuals are still not fully engaged in their studies which is indicated by missed online classes.⁶ Non-inclusivity of LGBTIQ individuals in education perpetuates inequality since a lack of education can compromise their prospects for socioeconomic growth. It thus becomes necessary to explore inclusive teaching and learning with a view to achieving equality, a non-discriminatory environment, and easy access for all students.

This paper will present a review of the pertinent literature, followed by an explanation of the materials and methods used to collect and analyse the data. This will be followed by a presentation of the results and discussion, indicating how they link to the literature. Finally, we shall present a conclusion from the results and provide recommendations based on the findings.

² Sonja J. Ellis and Ryan M. Bentham, "Inclusion of LGBTIQ Perspectives in School-Based Sexuality Education in Aotearoa/New Zealand: An Exploratory Study," *Sex Education* 21, no. 6 (November 2, 2021): 708–22,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2020.1863776>; Sawzan Abuhammad, "Barriers to Distance Learning during the COVID-19 Outbreak: A Qualitative Review from Parents' Perspective," *Heliyon* 6, no. 11 (November 2020): e05482, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05482>.

³ Xavier Fields and Christine Min Wotipka, "Effect of LGBT Anti-Discrimination Laws on School Climate and Outcomes for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual High School Students," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 19, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 307–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2020.1821276>; Ineke M. Pit-ten Cate et al., "Promoting Inclusive Education: The Role of Teachers' Competence and Attitudes.," *Insights into Learning Disabilities* 15, no. 1 (2018): 49–63, www.ldworldwide.org.

⁴ V.O. Netshandama, A.H. Mavhandu-Mudzusi, and P. Matshideze, "Deconstructing Matula (Taboo), a Multi-Stakeholder Narrative about LGBTI," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31, no. 4 (July 2017), <https://doi.org/10.20853/31-4-1328>; Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi and P.T. Sandy, "Human Rights Violation: Its Impact on the Mental Well-Being of LGBTI Students in a South African Rural-Based University," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31, no. 4 (July 23, 2017): 325–40, <https://doi.org/10.20853/31-4-892>; M. Nduna et al., "Studying Sexuality: LGBTI Experiences in Institutions of Higher Education in Southern Africa," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31, no. 4 (July 2017), <https://doi.org/10.20853/31-4-1330>; Valenshia Jagessar and Thabo Msibi, "'It's Not That Bad': Homophobia in the Residences of a University in KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa," *Agenda* 29, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 63–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2015.1022984>.

⁵ Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi, "Impact of Stigma and Discrimination on Sexual Wellbeing of LGBTI Students in a South African Rural University," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31, no. 4 (July 2017): 208–18, <https://doi.org/10.20853/31-4-894>.

⁶ Azwihangwisi Helen Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al., "Transgender Student Experiences of Online Education during COVID-19 Pandemic Era in Rural Eastern Cape Area of South Africa: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study," *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 6, no. 2 (September 10, 2021): 110–28, <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2021.14>.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding teaching and learning and the need for inclusiveness

To fully conceptualise inclusive teaching and learning, it becomes necessary to specifically understand inclusion within the index developed by Booth and Ainscom.⁷ According to these scholars, inclusion in the classroom exists within three dimensions, namely: the creation of an inclusive culture, implementing inclusive policies, and evolving inclusive practices.⁸ From this perspective, inclusive teaching is seen as a planned attempt to promote diversity through collaborative means that seek respect and acknowledge the voices of all students.⁹ Therefore, creating inclusive learning cultures in higher education institutions should be supported by progressive institutional policies that promote diversity in all learning spaces.¹⁰ Petkovska argues that the lack of an inclusive culture often marginalises minority groups in higher education institutions.¹¹ It is clear that incorporating counter-normative curricular items focusing on a wide range of sexualities is insufficient to improve institutional culture.¹²

Matthyse advances the idea of challenging the status quo that seeks to maintain the perpetual marginalisation of LGBTIQ students in higher education institutions.¹³ Understanding inclusion within the value system outlined in the Index of Inclusion framework is essential in the development of modern teaching and learning.¹⁴ Previously, this framework had been incorporated to address the marginalisation of special needs students in the classroom.¹⁵ Although LGBTIQ students cannot be classified within these educational and psychological needs, it is imperative to note that the need for their inclusion can be considered a “special” and “sensitive” matter based on prevailing societal norms.¹⁶

The need for inclusion can, thus, be linked to the Index of Inclusion which seeks to measure how organisations embrace diversity and inclusivity. Scholars can use this index to determine the level of inclusive teaching and learning of the marginalised – over and above the basic requirements of access and the number of LGBTIQ students present in a classroom setup.¹⁷ To develop an LGBTIQ-inclusive learning space, it is imperative to define and outline the characteristics of inclusive teaching and learning characteristics. According to Dewsbury, inclusive teaching and learning is ‘a philosophy of teaching that provides equal opportunities for all students to have a successful learning

⁷ Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow, “Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools.,” United Kingdom: Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education, 2000; Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow, “Index for Inclusion Developing Learning and Participation in Schools.,” 2002, [https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/Index English.pdf](https://www.eenet.org.uk/resources/docs/Index%20English.pdf).

⁸ Gladys Ayaya, Tsedisio Michael Makoelle, and Martyn van der Merwe, “Participatory Action Research: A Tool for Enhancing Inclusive Teaching Practices Among Teachers in South African Full-Service Schools,” *SAGE Open* 10, no. 4 (October 10, 2020): 215824402096357, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020963576>.

⁹ Pit-ten Cate et al., “Promoting Inclusive Education: The Role of Teachers’ Competence and Attitudes.”; Lawrie et al., “Moving towards Inclusive Learning and Teaching: A Synthesis of Recent Literature.”

¹⁰ Tony Booth, “The Name of the Rose: Inclusive Values into Action in Teacher Education,” *PROSPECTS* 41, no. 3 (September 22, 2011): 303–18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-011-9200-z>.

¹¹ Viktorija Petkovska, “Coping with Marginalized Students Inclusion in EL Teacher Training.,” *Journal of Education and Practice* 6, no. 18 (2015): 216–19, www.iiste.org.

¹² Dennis A. Francis, “What Does the Teaching and Learning of Sexuality Education in South African Schools Reveal about Counter-Normative Sexualities?,” *Sex Education* 19, no. 4 (July 4, 2019): 406–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1563535>.

¹³ G. Matthyse, “Heteronormative Higher Education: Challenging This Status Quo through LGBTIQ Awareness-Raising,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31, no. 4 (July 2017), <https://doi.org/10.20853/31-4-890>.

¹⁴ Booth, “The Name of the Rose: Inclusive Values into Action in Teacher Education.”

¹⁵ Gunjan Tyagi, “Role of Teacher in Inclusive Education,” *International Journal of Education and Applied Research* 6, no. 1 (2016): 115–16.

¹⁶ Cristian D. Magnus and Mattias Lundin, “Challenging Norms: University Students’ Views on Heteronormativity as a Matter of Diversity and Inclusion in Initial Teacher Education,” *International Journal of Educational Research* 79 (2016): 76–85, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.06.006>.

¹⁷ Lawrie et al., “Moving towards Inclusive Learning and Teaching: A Synthesis of Recent Literature.”

experience.’¹⁸ The successful learning experience spoken of by this author refers to a teaching and learning process which is uninterrupted by external factors and provides a conducive learning space for all students.¹⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic can be described as an external factor that negatively affected teaching and learning in the classroom. Inclusive teaching and learning for LGBTIQ students involve, among other things, curriculum-based material that promotes the positive representation of the LGBTIQ community, with the aim of cultivating a diverse learning environment.

COVID-19 pandemic as a barrier to online teaching and learning

The COVID-19 pandemic presented fundamental challenges to access to teaching and learning in higher education institutions, with the imposed lockdown regulations forcing institutions to migrate their existing modes of learning to online-based teaching and learning.²⁰ This can be considered a barrier to effective teaching and learning, as students have to adopt online forms of learning that lack practical application of the theory learned in the classroom setup.²¹

The COVID-19 pandemic and enforced lockdown regulations plunged the educational sector into crisis mode, as all former contact-based learning now had to be conducted online.²² This presented a challenge for developing countries, where fast and reliable internet is still a scarce resource.²³ The levels of computer literacy became a major issue of focus, as students were required to have basic competencies that would allow them to navigate the online classroom setup, and submit assignments, tests and examinations online.²⁴ Pokhrel and Chhetri highlighted digital tools being the main stumbling block.²⁵

Beyond the ICT-related challenges posed by the pandemic, this mode of learning also emphasised the need for a stable background, as children from disadvantaged and dysfunctional family settings found it harder to adapt to these changes.²⁶ Singaram et al. state that although the learning was taking place online, certain student-centred courses designed for face-to-face teaching and learning were largely compromised due to the pandemic.²⁷ In cases where lockdown regulations were eased, the strict adherence to social distancing and quarantine periods for students who tested positive for the

¹⁸ Bryan M. Dewsbury, “On Faculty Development of STEM Inclusive Teaching Practices,” *FEMS Microbiology Letters* 364, no. 18 (October 2, 2017), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1093/femsle/fnx179>.

¹⁹ Dewsbury, “On Faculty Development of STEM Inclusive Teaching Practices,” 2.

²⁰ Shireen Motala and Kirti Menon, “In Search of the ‘new Normal’: Reflections on Teaching and Learning during Covid-19 in a South African University | Southern African Review of Education with Education with Production,” *Southern African Review of Education with Education with Production* 26, no. 1 (2020): 80–99, <https://journals.co.za/doi/10.10520/ejc-sare-v26-n1-a6>.

²¹ Zohra Lassoued, Mohammed Alhendawi, and Raed Bashitialshaer, “An Exploratory Study of the Obstacles for Achieving Quality in Distance Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Education Sciences* 10, no. 9 (September 3, 2020): 232, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10090232>.

²² Zoe DUBY et al., “Navigating Education in the Context of COVID-19 Lockdowns and School Closures: Challenges and Resilience Among Adolescent Girls and Young Women in South Africa,” *Frontiers in Education* 7 (March 7, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.856610>.

²³ Abuhammad, “Barriers to Distance Learning during the COVID-19 Outbreak: A Qualitative Review from Parents’ Perspective.”

²⁴ Veena S Singaram, Kimesh L Naidoo, and Shenuka Singh, “Self-Directed Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives of South African Final-Year Health Professions Students,” *Advances in Medical Education and Practice* Volume 13 (January 2022): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.2147/AMEP.S339840>.

²⁵ Sumitra Pokhrel and Roshan Chhetri, “A Literature Review on Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Teaching and Learning,” *Higher Education for the Future* 8, no. 1 (January 19, 2021): 133–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347631120983481>.

²⁶ Florian Klapproth et al., “Teachers’ Experiences of Stress and Their Coping Strategies during COVID-19 Induced Distance Teaching,” *Journal of Pedagogical Research* 4, no. 4 (2020): 444–52, <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.2020062805>.

²⁷ Singaram, Naidoo, and Singh, “Self-Directed Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives of South African Final-Year Health Professions Students.”

virus largely affected the university's teaching and learning process.²⁸ While the hybrid forms of modern-day teaching and learning are still being tested and explored, it is important to note the crippling effect the COVID-19 pandemic had on successful teaching and learning.²⁹

Cyberbullying during the COVID-19 pandemic

Cyberbullying can be described as harassment and ill-treatment of an individual, primarily via electronic messaging.³⁰ Doxbeck and Noel state that most scholarly articles that examine cyberbullying have placed their focus on the K-12 years of child development, with limited focus on the prevailing culture at the university level.³¹ Developing a high emotional competency within this context is essential for a child's development, as an absence of this competency has often led adolescents to engage in harmful behaviours such as cyberbullying.³²

What concerns most scholars in this field is the prevailing culture of cyberbullying of sexual and gender minorities in higher education institutions. What is even of greater concern is the rise of this form of harassment during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has negatively affected university teaching and learning.³³ Studies show how the students' stress and anxiety levels further manifested in depression due to cyberbullying.³⁴ This has placed greater pressure on institutional management to create inclusive cultures that do not breed any forms of homophobia that may lead to cyberbullying and physical harassment.³⁵ Cyberbullying victimisation studies have shown a high risk of suicide among adolescents, with depression being the main clinical cause.³⁶ The rise in cyberbullying not only places a threat to the state of public health but also threatens access to higher education and learning.³⁷ The Inclusion Index proposed by Booth and Ainscom necessitates the need to institutionalise policy reforms that cater to sexual and gender minorities and students with special needs.³⁸ The homophobic

²⁸ François van Schalkwyk, "Reflections on the Public University Sector and the Covid-19 Pandemic in South Africa," *Studies in Higher Education* 46, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 44–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1859682>.

²⁹ Cedric B. Mpungose, "Emergent Transition from Face-to-Face to Online Learning in a South African University in the Context of the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 1 (December 2, 2020): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00603-x>.

³⁰ Roberto L. Abreu and Maureen C. Kenny, "Cyberbullying and LGBTQ Youth: A Systematic Literature Review and Recommendations for Prevention and Intervention," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 11, no. 1 (March 24, 2018): 81–97, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-017-0175-7>.

³¹ Courtney Doxbeck and Tiffany Karalis Noel, "Equity in the Academy? Examining Cyberbullying Victimization and Conflict Resolution Across Sexual and Gender Identity During COVID-19," *Frontiers in Education Technology* 4, no. 2 (March 12, 2021): p1, <https://doi.org/10.22158/fet.v4n2p1>.

³² Ainur Khairina Khairi et al., "The Importance of Emotional Competence in Preventing Cyberbullying: The Role of Family as Moderator," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 12, no. 4 (April 7, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i4/13062>.

³³ Clara Bleckmann, Birgit Leyendecker, and Julian Busch, "Sexual and Gender Minorities Facing the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Systematic Review of the Distinctive Psychosocial and Health-Related Impact," *Journal of Homosexuality*, May 16, 2022, 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2022.2074335>.

³⁴ Simangele Mkhize and Nirmala Gopal, "Cyberbullying Perpetration: Children and Youth at Risk of Victimization during Covid-19 Lockdown," *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology* 10 (April 30, 2021): 525–37, <https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2021.10.61>.

³⁵ Elizabeth Englander, "Bullying, Cyberbullying, Anxiety, and Depression in a Sample of Youth during the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Pediatric Reports* 13, no. 3 (September 14, 2021): 546–51, <https://doi.org/10.3390/pediatric13030064>.

³⁶ Rebecca S. Levine, Amy Vatne Bintliff, and Anita Raj, "Gendered Analysis of Cyberbullying Victimization and Its Associations with Suicidality: Findings from the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey," *Adolescents* 2, no. 2 (April 26, 2022): 235–51, <https://doi.org/10.3390/adolescents2020019>.

³⁷ Kris Varjas et al., "Technology Hurts? Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth Perspectives of Technology and Cyberbullying," *Journal of School Violence* 12, no. 1 (January 3, 2013): 27–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2012.731665>.

³⁸ Booth and Ainscow, "Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools. ."

forms of cyberbullying that have taken precedence during this pandemic point to a lack of education and exposure to sexual and gender minorities.³⁹

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study followed a phenomenographic method, which focuses on how individuals experience a specific phenomenon. This design was specifically chosen to focus on the learning and teaching experience and the diverse manners in which learners experience learning content in relation to their context. The researchers considered this design to be most suitable, as the issues of inclusiveness of teaching and learning during COVID-19 and beyond may not be purely objective to LGBTIQ individuals but depend on the participants' situations and where they are. Therefore, their experiences may vary from person to person and according to the circumstances around them. A phenomenographic design enabled us to understand the variances in the inclusiveness of teaching and learning experienced by LGBTIQ individuals during COVID-19 and beyond.

Study setting

The study was conducted in institutions of higher education in South Africa. The main focus was public universities. South Africa has 26 public universities. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the entire world from 2020 onwards and challenged how teaching and learning were offered in institutions of higher education, most of the universities in South Africa had to modify their mode of teaching from fully face-to-face contact sessions to either a blended mode of instruction or fully online teaching. South Africa's higher education institutions operate within the country's constitution, which advocates for inclusiveness and access to education for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Study population

The study participants were LGBTIQ individuals from higher education institutions recruited through the snowballing technique. The first author asked three students who belong to the LGBTIQ community if they would be interested in participating in the study. This was done after explaining the purpose of the study and the relevant ethical issues and inclusion criteria, which included being a registered student at any university in South Africa for at least two years (to ensure that the person has been at the university before and during COVID-19) and identifying as part of the LGBTIQ community. The inclusion criteria were set to ensure that the participants would have the required experience. According to Patton, in phenomenographic studies, participants with experiences should be involved to ensure variation in the data.⁴⁰ To this end, the inclusion criteria for this study were: registered student at a university in South Africa; having been a student in higher education before and during the COVID-19 era; aged eighteen years and above, and identifying as LGBTIQ. At the beginning of the study, the researchers had contact with three participants who met the inclusion criteria. The three participants were requested to refer other individuals with the inclusion criteria. To avoid any violation of the right to privacy, the initial participants were requested first to get permission to share potential participants' contact numbers with the researcher. The referred participants who indicated they wanted to participate were then contacted and requested to recruit other participants. The total number of participants referred was sixteen and they all agreed to participate. This number of participants was considered adequate, as phenomenographic studies normally use a small group of participants. However, scholars differ about the exact number of participants required, as some of them

³⁹ Englander, "Bullying, Cyberbullying, Anxiety, and Depression in a Sample of Youth during the Coronavirus Pandemic"; Pokhrel and Chhetri, "A Literature Review on Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Teaching and Learning."

⁴⁰ Michael Quinn Patton, "Two Decades of Developments in Qualitative Inquiry," *Qualitative Social Work* 1, no. 3 (September 15, 2002): 261–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325002001003636>.

emphasise the need to have a sample of 20 to 30 participants, while others consider seven to eleven adequate. Table 1 provides the biographical data of the participants.

Table 1: Participants' biographical data

Pseudonym	Gender/sexual identity	Age	Residential area	Year of registration
Joy	Transgender woman	22	Rural	2019
Mampuru	Transgender man	25	Urban	2018
Masana	Transgender woman	23	Rural	2018
Mavis	Lesbian woman	22	Rural	2019
Marty	Lesbian woman	23	Rural	2018
Maluta	Gay man	25	Urban	2019
Fany	Gay man	23	Urban	2019
Moja	Transgender woman	23	Rural	2019
Poppy	Queer	28	Urban	2017
Mulalo	Transgender woman	30	Rural	2019
Sessy	Transgender woman	28	Rural	2018
Berny	Gay man	29	Rural	2019
Matome	Queer	23	Urban	2019
Maggy	Lesbian woman	25	Rural	2017
Babe	Transgender woman	24	Urban	2019
Martha	Lesbian woman	34	Urban	2017

Data collection instrument

In phenomenographic studies, structured face-to-face interviews are preferred to ensure that the participants respond to similar research questions. Thus, the researchers used structured interviews, though instead of face-to-face interviews, WhatsApp calls were used to collect data in March 2022. The WhatsApp application is considered convenient, cost-effective and time-efficient for the purpose of data collection, and can also be used to collect data nationally. Moreover, WhatsApp is considered the most useful method of collecting data from vulnerable populations in descriptive phenomenological studies where anonymity and privacy are core issues. The use of WhatsApp was considered most appropriate for this study for these reasons and also because of travel restrictions and social distancing requirements to minimise the spread of COVID-19. Before collecting data, the researcher made an initial WhatsApp call to discuss the study and its ethical aspects. The participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and they, therefore, had the choice to participate or not, and to withdraw from the study at any time, even during the interview. They were also informed that there were no incentives for participating. However, they would be reimbursed for data utilised, if they wished. The participants were further informed that pseudonyms would be used. Each interview was initiated with the following open-ended question: How are teaching and learning

during COVID-19 and beyond inclusive to LGBTIQ individuals? Though most of the probes were based on how the participants responded to the initial questions, the following probes were also used in situations where the participant showed limited understanding of the research purpose and study questions:

- 1) How is/was the teaching and learning approach during and beyond COVID-19?
- 2) How inclusive are those approaches to you as a member of the LGBTIQ community?
- 3) How do you feel about those approaches?
- 4) How are those approaches affecting you?

With the aid of relevant prompts and probing questions, the participants were encouraged to share more information and examples.

Data analysis

Each audio recording was transcribed verbatim within twenty-four hours, using Otter.ai. The automatically transcribed information was read again while listening to the audio recording to correct spelling errors and miswritten concepts, as sometimes the transcriber writes whatever is mentioned, giving a different meaning to the context. The analysis in phenomenographic studies focuses on obtaining a better understanding of the similarities and differences between participants' experiences and the meanings attached to them. Furthermore, the analysis in phenomenography attempts to determine where and when alterations in conceptions occur. The researchers individually followed the analysis process as follows: The researcher read each transcript to have a sense of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon. The initial reading was followed by a thorough reading, where the researcher highlighted information provided which was relevant to the main research question and the pre-set probes. The researcher then provided the initial description of how the participants viewed the inclusivity of the LGBTIQ community in teaching and learning during and post-COVID-19. This was followed by grouping all the related descriptions into categories focusing on differences and similarities. The two researchers then met via Microsoft Teams and shared and discussed their categorisation. Where differences occurred, they both provided reasons until a consensus was reached. After reaching a consensus, the final table of categories and subcategories of variations was compiled.

FINDINGS

Two main variations emerged from the analysis of the participants' experiences: 'Safety', and 'Access to education'. Both variations had several subcategories.

Table 2: Categories of variations and relevant subcategories

Categories of variations	Subcategory
Variation:1 Safety	Verbal abuse
	Cyberbullying
	Discriminatory language
	Physical violence
Variation 2: Access to online education	Data to access learning
	Internet access
	Technological gadgets
	Electricity supply
	Finance

Variation 1: Safety

Safety is one of the factors which determines inclusivity in education. The participants indicated differences in their safety experiences when learning online, as necessitated by the COVID-19 restrictions. Aspects of safety included verbal abuse, cyberbullying, discriminatory language and physical violence.

Verbal abuse

Some participants felt that online education made them *safe from verbal abuse*, as articulated in the words of one participant,

I really like this online platform. As people do not see one another but just hear the voices, it give[s] me a safe [feeling]. Because of my voice, when people hear me speaking, they always address me as ma'am or Sister Joy, which really confirms my gender identity. Unlike in the contact space, where people will end up calling me all sorts of names as I have not fully transited. (Joy)

Cyberbullying

However, other participants mentioned that there was *an increase in cyberbullying*, either through the use of cellphone numbers or email addresses, as noted in the following excerpt:

Since we started attending classes online, I have received several threats via cellphones from people I do not know. This is because the educators have created WhatsApp groups and also Teams group. On [a] WhatsApp group, most of [the] people end up getting our numbers and even see our pictures. Then a person would just call me with a hidden caller identity and say all the vulgar words. Some even threaten that they will rape me wherever they meet me. The problem is that I cannot move out of the group because I will miss all the important information and announcements. (Mampuru)

Discriminatory language

Besides the threats to the safety inherent in cyberbullying, which are intentional, participants raised the issue of *Gender sensitivity in language use*. The participants had diverse views on the language used in teaching and learning materials. The participants highlighted that the language used in teaching and learning materials is discriminatory toward LGBTIQ individuals. This was noted in the following example:

It is so easy to understand that the university is still very discriminatory. Even the type of examples used in the study material. The language is so heteronormative. They will always use terms such as 'husband and wife' instead of using 'partners'. Some lecturers would, out of the blue, just mention homophobic statements. One can see that there is nothing for us transgender and homosexual individuals. (Masana)

While some participants were concerned about the language used in teaching, others were not even bothered.

At least, because they do not know who we are, whatever discriminatory words they express do not bother me, as I know that it is their personal attitudes and ignorance, but not targeting me per se. Unlike when I was still attending face-to-face class, where if the lecturer used a discriminative word, everyone would look at me or even laugh. (Mavis)

Physical violence

Apart from the verbal violence in cyberbullying and the discriminatory language used in teaching and learning, participants raised the issue of *safety in relation to sexual violence*.

COVID-19 is my lifesaver. I am now safe from all the violence and the threat of being gang-raped in order to make me straight on campus. This makes me attend school freely in the safety of my home. (Marty)

While some felt safe from physical violence, for others, not being at school posed more risk of physical violence:

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, we are not allowed on campus, as all classes are online. I end up having to be continuously abused by my partner. I cannot do anything about [it]. This is affecting my study. Sometimes he is drunk and makes all types of noise in such a way that I cannot even concentrate on Teams, or he can just pull me to go to bed with him. (Maluta)

Apart from safety challenges, the other issue raised was access to education.

Variation 2: Access to online education

Access to education is another variation that emerged from the data analysis. There were large differences in how participants perceived their access to education during and post-COVID-19. While some had full access, other participants found accessing education a challenge. The differences were related to data affordability, internet access, technological gadgets, electricity supply and finance.

Data to access learning

To access online classes, students require data. For students like Fany, there is always free Wi-Fi allowing him continuous access to education:

Since they started online school, I have never missed class. The good thing is that I have a class wherever I am. I am able to attend all the classes and download all the teaching materials and videos. There is free Wi-Fi throughout the day as I stay next to [a] Rea Vaya bus station. The university also gives us data every month. Even while I am not at home, I always have data to access the online class. (Fany)

While some have free Wi-Fi, other participants have data challenges preventing them from accessing classes:

The university provides us with data. But that is too little. Within ten days, I am out of data and have to buy. Data is very expensive. I end up spending the money I should have used for my other needs. Sometimes I do not join the class due to a lack of data. (Moja).

Internet access

The other issue raised is internet access. While some participants have internet access throughout the day, others have limited access:

I am so blessed because we have internet throughout. Connectivity is not an issue at all, regardless of the network one is using. We are staying next to power stations of

all the major networks used in South Africa, such as Telkom, Vodacom and MTN. (Poppy)

In the area where I am staying, there is no network. I have to go to the internet shop to access the internet. The problem is that people make a lot of noise there and I cannot request them to keep quiet. I end up not hearing most of the information given. Therefore, I prefer face-to-face classes, where I can ask questions. (Mulalo)

The internet is so unstable. I have to keep on moving from one area in the yard to get internet. Sometimes I even have to move out of the house and stand on the street in order to get internet access. In the process, I continuously get disconnected from the Teams. This is a struggle for me. As I am speaking with you now, I am expected to re-register for another module because I was disconnected immediately after starting my exam, and now they said that I failed [the] Invigilation app, and it is like I have been copying. COVID-19 is making my life difficult, as I have never failed any examination before this online issue. I used to pass all my subjects with distinctions. (Sessy)

Technological gadgets

Besides variations stemming from the internet, there are issues with technological gadgets:

Online study is not working well for some of us. The computer I am using is problematic. I think this online learning is for people who can afford sophisticated gadgets that do not freeze repeatedly. I try to use my phone sometimes, but it fails to connect. Therefore, I am missing a lot of lessons. I cannot download most of the programmes which are necessary for my study. When I take the computer to IT experts, they say my computer's memory is too small and not compatible with most of the programme[s] utilised currently. I am told that I need to buy a new computer as the one I am using cannot even be upgraded. The required computer is R10 000 and above, which I cannot afford. (Berny)

While Mercy raised the computer challenge, Matome is very happy about the gadgets she is using:

I am so grateful we have to go to online learning because of the COVID-19 lockdown. The university has deposited money in our accounts to pay for the laptop. The laptop has all the programmes required. I can even record while the lecturers are teaching instead of opening the computer to read the lectures forwarded to us by the lecturer. I just open the audio recordings and listen. I sometimes listen to the recordings while I am doing my house chores such as cleaning or laundry. When I am too lazy to go out of bed, I just switch on my laptop and join the Teams while in bed. (Matome)

Electricity supply

Participants further raised the issue of electricity:

As you know, in South Africa, electricity is a problem. There is continuous load-shedding, which makes some of the students miss class. The problem is worse when it happens during the examination. That makes one completely stressed because, at times, one ends up being considered absent from the examination. When one tries to do a follow-up and explain, the people responsible do not support it. Eskom does not

mind. We sometimes have stage two load-shedding where the electricity goes off for two hours. But it ended up going off for six hours; two times a day. (Maggy)

However, for other students, electricity is not a challenge at all, as there is no load-shedding:

I stay in the central area. There is no load-shedding at all. The only time we are without electricity is when the cable is stolen, which is a very rare incident. Therefore, I never miss any class, fail to submit an assignment or write a test. There is always electricity for me. (Fany)

Finance

A number of participants mentioned the economic advantage of attending online education:

As you know, I am a hustler, and online education gives me the advantage of making additional money whenever I have an opportunity. I will be called for sex work or run anything for my customer, and I can go there without a problem of missing classes as all the lessons are recorded and emailed to us after the presentation. Whether a person has attended or not, we still access what is taught. (Babe)

Me and my partner adopted a child last year. I thank COVID-19 because my partner is working from home, and I am also working and studying from home. We have time for our child. If it were not due for online studying, I would have been travelling daily to school and we would have had to hire someone to take care of the baby. But this is saving us money. (Martha)

DISCUSSION

In this section, we will discuss the experiences of LGBTIQ students regarding the inclusiveness of the teaching and learning strategies used during COVID-19 and beyond. The discussion is based on the findings above and interwoven with relevant literature on inclusivity in online teaching and learning spaces, particularly focusing on students in the LGBTIQ communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the findings provided varied insights in the area above, this discussion is organised according to the two main variations/issues of safety and access to online education.

The question of safety in online education elicited varied views, confirming that the issue cannot be regarded in a simple and one-sided manner. The participants in this study proved that there are both positive and negative aspects to studying online. The positive aspects included safety from verbal and sexual abuse since the participants, who often face horrendous assaults in public, were safe in the virtual spaces.⁴¹ One participant called COVID-19 a lifesaver because it led to online learning, which protected them from attacks. The participants confirmed some previous findings by Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al. that students from the LBGTIQ communities found it safer to study online.⁴²

However, the other side to studying online was an increase in cyberbullying and domestic violence, which calls for a balanced view of online learning safety for LGBTIQ students. It is not enough for researchers to focus on the benefits of studying online, students' contexts should be considered so that blended study options can be provided. This paper argues that such an approach

⁴¹ Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al., "Transgender Student Experiences of Online Education during COVID-19 Pandemic Era in Rural Eastern Cape Area of South Africa: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study."

⁴² Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al. "Transgender Student Experiences of Online Education during COVID-19 Pandemic Era in Rural Eastern Cape Area of South Africa: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study."

would be the true manifestation of creating an inclusive culture, where inclusive policies are implemented and inclusive practices evolve, as Ayaya et al. advocate.⁴³

The second variation in the findings related to access, where the participants' responses represented varied views on access, with data affordability, internet access, technological gadgets, electricity and finance as points of concern. While these problems are the same as those experienced by students outside of the LGBTIQ communities, they are exacerbated by the fact that the participants are already facing the other challenge of being marginalised by society.⁴⁴ On the one hand, the findings confirmed findings in the literature about the stumbling blocks of online learning, such as the possible lack of access to digital tools.⁴⁵ The participants painstakingly explained and illustrated how the lack of data or computer problems hindered their studies. On the other hand, those with the financial means or favourable situations could access education and other benefits. In fact, some of the participants listed the advantages and benefits of studying online, such as the opportunity to embark on business and the time to attend to family responsibilities.

The paper highlights that online access is a mirror of society, where one's sociocultural background often determines whether one has access to the internet and data, which often depends on where one is located and one's financial status. The participants who seem to be having severe challenges are from rural areas. This shows that COVID-19 has perpetuated the challenges LGBTIQ students face in rural areas regarding safety and access to educational institutions in South Africa. The paper reiterates that true inclusivity should consider the varied nature of students' backgrounds and provide various modes of education.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The discourse on contemporary inclusive teaching and learning goes beyond the accommodation of children with special needs, as the need to cultivate an inclusive environment for sexual and gender minority students has never been more relevant. This paper highlighted the major challenges that LGBTIQ students face in higher education during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include threats to safety through behaviour such as verbal abuse, cyberbullying, discriminatory language and physical violence. In addition, the study illuminated issues of access and difficulty in accessing online education based on lack of internet data, internet accessibility, lack of access to technology devices, unstable electricity supply and various financial difficulties. The study further distinguished between rural and urban students, with the former's challenges being aggravated by the general lack of resources. While heterosexual and cisgender students also face these challenges, the LGBTIQ students' plight is worsened by the negative attitudes of the university community. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded these challenges as most institutions had to move fully online during and in the aftermath of the pandemic, regardless of diversity. The study, thus, highlighted the lack of inclusivity in teaching and learning activities during and beyond the COVID-19, particularly for LGBTIQ students. Therefore, we recommend that university communities should ensure a safe online learning environment for LGBTIQ students. There is a need for inclusive policies that affirm gender diversity at university campuses to promote inclusivity. Such policies should articulate consequence management mechanisms for cases when inclusivity measures are violated. Regarding teaching and learning, institutions should pursue more blended models and approaches to cater to students from diverse gender identities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Attention to these recommendations can go a long way to ensuring inclusivity of teaching and learning to LGBTIQ individuals during COVID-19 and beyond.

⁴³ Ayaya, Makoelle, and van der Merwe, "Participatory Action Research: A Tool for Enhancing Inclusive Teaching Practices Among Teachers in South African Full-Service Schools."

⁴⁴ Petkovska, "Coping with Marginalized Students Inclusion in EL Teacher Training."

⁴⁵ Pokhrel and Chhetri, "A Literature Review on Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Teaching and Learning."

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