EXPLORING THE STATE OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: STUDENTS' PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES

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Abstract. *Calls for a decolonised and socially inclusive higher education in the last decade have led to the adoption of the Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training System. However, due to the reluctant implementation of this policy and defiance to these calls, higher education remains fundamentally biased and unequal. Given the forgoing submission, this phenomenological study explored the state of social inclusion in higher education. Quantitative data was obtained from sixty student teachers using a questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics. For triangulation and validation purposes, focus group interviews were used to collect qualitative data which was analysed using content and thematic techniques. The findings demonstrate that while there has been increased awareness about the issues of social justice, social inclusion, equity, and equality in higher education, more still needs to be done to realise real, meaningful transformation which will deliver the envisaged social inclusion. Therefore, the study calls for government intervention and various organisations to closely monitor and enforce transformation. The study further recommends regular oversight visits to interview students about social inclusivity and anonymous online surveys in which students rate specific indicators of social inclusivity using a Likert scale.*
Key Words: Social inclusion; Decolonisation; Social Justice; Higher Education; Phenomenological Experiences.

Introduction

The advent of decolonisation epistemologies in higher education over the last decade has heightened research interest on issues of transformation and social justice, culminating in the availability of substantial literature perspectives on this phenomenon (Chaka, Shange, Ndlangamandla, & Shandu-Phetla, 2024; Chaka, 2024; Xu, & Fang, 2024; Mapuya, 2024; Mapuya, 2023; Dawson, 2020; R'boul, 2022; Ndofirepi, 2023; Letsekha, 2022, Mahabeer, 2020; Norwich, 2014; Lemon, 2024). However, there is a recognisable gap of research on the social inclusiveness of higher education. This study sought to contribute towards closing this gap by exploring the phenomenological experiences of fourth year student teachers on the state of social inclusion in higher education.

Informed by the experience driven perceptions of these participants, the study presents some practical insights and empirically based recommendations to accelerate transformation and social inclusivity in higher education. By exploring the phenomenological experiences of the participants, and making some recommendations in the final analysis, the study makes a meaningful and impactful contribution towards the realisation of a truly transformed and socially inclusive higher education system both nationally and globally. The study does not only emphasize a multi stakeholder co-development of indicators of social inclusion, but it also offers some practical guidelines to achieve a complete set of feasible and conceptually appealing indicators of social inclusion in higher education. It is envisaged that these will add to the ongoing attempts to develop a more robust criteria of comparison and measurement of this contentious concept of social inclusion and drive progress towards its realisation.

The concepts of access, equity, active participation, quality, success, and social justice will be used regularly throughout the study. This was informed by the nested nexus they share with the concept of social inclusion which is intimate and inseparable in nature. In fact, these

concepts are a prerequisite for social inclusion, which is the ultimate goal. The pragmatic theoretical view advanced by this study is that students who are socially excluded need to have equal access to higher education as a starting point towards their social inclusion. Once in higher education, they need to be given equal and fair opportunities for active participation in accessing quality education through pedagogical practices which are consistent with their learning needs and social profiles. Lastly, they need to succeed in their higher education studies and obtain qualifications on record time, through quality learning experiences which are informed by their unique individual identities and attributes. The study argues that this is the epitome of social inclusion in higher education which has thus far been found to be elusive, as well documented in literature.

Background to the study

Pasha (2024) argues that the last two decades have witnessed an increased drive towards ensuring equal access to education across all the various levels. At the centre of these initiatives has been specific focus on students who could have been previously excluded from access to educational opportunities. Shava et al., 2024) maintain that this drive has been consistent with the proclamations and declarations made in international agreements which have been endorsed by various countries regarding the protection, fulfilment, and appreciation of the right to education for all global citizens.

Hence, social cohesion and inclusion are some of the top priorities of education systems which have a history of marginalisation, segregation, discrimination, social injustice, and inequality (Shava et al., 2024). In the context of the South African Basic Education and higher education systems, the above claim finds expression in the proclamations and declarations of Department of Basic Education (2015) and the Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training System. Guided by progressive and liberal legislation such as the South African Constitution of 1994, the Bill of Rights and the Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training System, one would expect higher education to be socially inclusive to all its constituencies.

On the contrary, research on the current state of social inclusion in higher education presents a narrative of persistent social exclusion, social injustice, inequality and systemic marginalisation of students from previously disadvantaged social backgrounds (R'boul, 2022, Mapuya, 2023; 2024; Norwich, 2014), Xu, & Fang, 2024, Ndofirepi, 2023; Ndlangamandla, 2024, & Mthembu et al., 2024). In the collective views of Xu, and Fang, (2024) and Mapuya (2024) this usually takes place in the form of dominant use of a second language in instruction, teaching, learning, assessment, and consultations which results in the marginalisation of other students. This implies that despite the ongoing conversations, initiatives and drives, social inclusion and real transformation in higher education still exist in the abstract realm. This submission is also corroborated by Gale and Hodge (2017) who described social inclusion in higher education as a collective and non-existent disillusionment emanating from the structural mismatch between desired aspirations in policies and the real probabilities in higher education spaces. Subscribing to the above sentiments, Shava et al. (2024) lament that the attainment of social inclusion in higher education has been slowed down by challenges related to access, equity, and success.

Consistent with the above submissions, Mapuya (2024) ratifies the earlier concerns raised by Lumadi (2021) that despite the historical background and the issues of social injustice that characterise the South African higher education space, the present higher education dispensation still perpetuates and sustain social exclusion, social injustice and inequality in various ways. In fact, the social exclusionism of higher education is one of the topical issues which one comes across frequently in literature perspectives on higher education (Dawson,

2020; Letsekha, 2022; Mahabeer, 2020; Manathunga et al., 2021 and Mdzanga & Moeng, 2021; R'boul, 2022). Previous studies on decolonisation epistemologies of higher education have also made similar submissions (Horsthemke, 2017; Jansen, 2017; Leibowitz, 2017; Mbembe, 2016; Jogee et al., 2018). On the other hand, with all the calls for a decolonised and more socially inclusive higher education system having reached their peak, reports by Leathern (2025) which suggest double a growth of the only Afrikaans University in South Africa in 2025 serve as a stark reminder that issues of social injustice, social exclusion and inequality will persist in the South African higher education for generations to come. Most importantly, these reports suggest that higher education in general need to undergo a radical transformation for it to be truly socially reformed and transformed.

Building on the above, research on the politics of higher education demonstrates that it has always been a highly contested space plagued with issues of access, success, transformation, social justice, inequality, and equity (Shava et al., 2024; Mapuya 2024). In support of the above narratives, Chaka, (2024), Xu, and Fang, (2024) and Ndlangamandla, (2024) concur that this has been further complicated by the politicisation and polarisation of decolonisation epistemologies in higher education which have added to the contestations on the nexus between social justice, social inclusion, issues of access and widening participation in higher education. The commercialisation of higher education as an essential public commodity and the competition involved in accessing it have also intensified these contestations.

Most importantly, conversations on the current state of social inclusion in higher education evolve around social justice, access, equality and the language of instruction, teaching, learning and assessment (Smith & Myers, 2024; Shaw, 2024; Shava, Chasokela, & Mangena, 2024; Chaka, et al, 2024; Chaka, 2024; Xu, & Fang, 2024; Mapuya, 2023). However, while scholars on decolonisation of higher education and inclusivity do not necessarily confine themselves to a specific theoretical framework, their collective submissions derive a common shared agenda of social justice. One can therefore not discuss social inclusion in isolation of social justice because these constructs draw from each other. It is thus important to highlight that social justice has informed and dominated most discourses on decolonisation which has been perceived as an end to social inclusion in higher education (Dawson, 2020; R'boul, 2022; Letsekha, 2022; Mahabeer, 2020).

However, despite the idea of widening participation being at the centre of the policy agenda in higher education, recent reports suggest that students from poor socio-economic status remain significantly underrepresented in higher education (Winter, Webb, & Turner, 2024; Gupta, & Gomez, 2024; Nieminen, 2024; Smith & Myers, 2024; Tavares, 2024). Similar observations were also made earlier by Kottmann, Vossensteyn, Kolster, Veidemane, Blasko, Biagi, & Sánchez-Barrioluengo (2019) and O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood (2015) who argued that while the idea of social inclusion has been widely accepted and embraced in higher education, there is no evidence on the actual translation and implementation of the values and ethos of social inclusion through inclusive pedagogies. As such, Kottmann, et al (2019) point out that the socially excluded and marginalised students have a high probability of dropping out of the higher education and exit the system without any qualification. In profiling these students, O'Shea, et al (2015) maintain that this is a cohort of students from low socio-economic background, students with disabilities, students from rural areas, indigenous students and those from non-English speaking backgrounds. For Salmi and D'Addio, (2020), these are underrepresented and equity target groups in higher education.

With the issues of access, success, quality, and equity being a persistent ongoing pressing global phenomenon, it is necessary to begin by looking at the South African context, in which the research site of this study is located. Correspondingly, despite being guided and regulated by some of the most progressive and liberal pieces of legislation such as the South African

Constitution of 1994, the Bill of Rights and the Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training System, research shows that the South African Higher education system is still grappling with issues of social exclusion, social injustice, and inequality (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Salmi & D'Addio, 2020; Chaka, et al, 2024; Mapuya, 2024; Letsekha, 2022). Pasha (2024) and Boughey and McKenna (2021) jointly cite challenges related to the implementation of these policies and legislation.

Broadening the scope on calls for a socially inclusive higher education system across the globe, the study notes that as a universal initiative to eradicate inequality and to provide quality education to all global citizens, among others, the United Nations adopted the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. Included in these goals is goal number four, which seeks to promote and *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"*. This proclamation and declaration is very consistent with the values and ideologies that underpin social inclusion in education. Given these aspirations, this goal calls for the full realisation of social inclusion in all educational spaces, including but not limited to higher education across the globe. In ratification of the above submissions, Shava et al. (2024) argues that the need for a higher education system which is more socially inclusive responds to a significant social justice imperative as enshrined in the provisions and proclamations of Sustainable Development Goal number 4 in its totality. However, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report (2023) paints a very bleak picture on progress towards the realization of this goal.

The above literature perspectives on social inclusion present a convincing and persuading account that higher education has not yet been entirely transformed to provide an educational dispensation which is socially inclusive. Given the foregoing narratives, it is therefore necessary to explore the current state of social inclusion in higher education and come up with practical evidence-based guidelines on how to promote social inclusivity in higher education. Key to coining of these guidelines is the shared development, implementation and monitoring of core social inclusion indicators in higher education.

Statement of the problem or issue addressed

As presented by the Council on Higher Education, (2022, 2023 and 2024), the undergraduate and postgraduate throughput statistics on private and public higher education institutions in South Africa is fundamentally skewed along racial and social lines. Most concerning, this data point to a higher education system which is deeply entrenched in issues of social injustice, social exclusion, lack of access and success. In fact, recent studies on decolonisation epistemologies are unanimous that issues of language, race, social class, gender, and sexuality remain prevalent in higher education (Mapuya, 2024; Lumadi, 2021; Letsekha, 2022). Confirming this is the failure of students from poor socio-economic status and previously disadvantaged backgrounds to complete their studies on record time (Council on Higher Education, 2022, 2023 and 2024), thereby testifying the continued perpetuation of social exclusion, social injustice, and inequality in higher education. Given the above exposition, there is an urgent need for the adoption and implementation of policy reforms and initiatives towards a more socially transformed student driven quality higher education system.

Consistent with the above arguments is research evidence which is very conclusive that while the idea of social inclusion has been widely accepted and embraced in higher education, its real implementation through inclusive pedagogies is non-existent. A finding which one consistently comes across in literature to justify the above submission is that both students and academics concur that there has not been sufficient practical transformation for higher education to be truly social inclusive (Atanasova & Papen, 2025; Winter, Webb, & Turner, 2024; Altes, Willemse, Goei, & Ehren, 2024; Gupta & Gomez, 2024; Jia, Tan, & Santi, 2024;

Nieminen, 2024; Nieminen, Moriña, & Biagiotti, 2024; Shaw, 2024; Smith & Myers, 2024; Tavares, 2024 and UNESCO, 2024; Abamosa, 2021, Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2020; Kottmann, Vossensteyn, Kolster, Veidemane, Blasko, Biagi, & Sánchez-Barrioluengo, 2019; O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2015; Salmi & D'Addio, 2020). This prompts Atanasova and Papen (2025), Shaw (2024) and Tavares, (2024) to boldly contend that social exclusion, marginalisation, and other forms of inequalities continue to exist in higher education. Kottmann et al. (2019) suggest that this leads to the underutilisation of the hidden potential in these underrepresented students.

Among others, the underlying reasons for this lack of transformation towards a socially inclusive higher education system include the desire to maintain and preserve the status quo, lack of inclusive pedagogical expertise (Altes, Willemse, Goei, & Ehren, 2024; Shaw, 2024 Smith & Myers, 2024). Based on lived experiences in higher education, we argue that another compounding factor slowing down the realisation of a truly social inclusive higher education system is the voiceless nature of the socially excluded students. To mitigate the challenges that hinder the meaningful and practical realisation of social inclusion in higher education, all stakeholders need to be actively involved in the purposeful development, uncompromising adoption and close monitoring of some core indicators of social inclusion.

Aim and objectives

The founding aims and subsequent research questions and objectives of this study are as follows:

Research Aims
The overarching aim of this study was to explore the state of social inclusion in higher education from a students' phenomenological experiences perspective.

Research questions
To satisfy the above research aim, the study pursued the following research questions:
- What is the state of social inclusion in higher education from a students' phenomenological perspective?
- How do students score specific indicators of the current state of social inclusion in higher education based on their phenomenological experiences?

Research Objectives
To answer the research questions posed in the study above, the following research objectives were formulated:
- To explore the state of social inclusion in higher education from a students' phenomenological perspective.
- To establish how students score specific indicators of the current state of social inclusion in higher education based on their phenomenological experiences.

It therefore follows that the study was carefully orchestrated around the above research aim, research questions and research objectives.

Theoretical framework

For alignment and consistency with phenomenology and interpretivism which underpinned data collection, the theory of Social Constructivism as pioneered by Vygotsky (1978) was chosen. This theory was found to be compatible with the current study because of its emphasis on active interactions with the environment and active involvement in the formation, interpretation, and creation of meaning out of one's experiences. At its basic and simplest position in educational practice and provision, the theory of social constructivism strives to ensure that no student is excluded from access and meaningful participation in the

education process which will result in academic success at the best potential of each individual student. This is one of the core values advanced by the social dimension of higher education, which also finds expression in numerous policies, legislation and proclamations seeking to promote the agenda of social inclusion in higher education (Wesselmann, Bradley, Taggart, and Williams, 2023; Ozili, 2023; Atanasova & Papen, 2025 and Altes, Willemse, Goei, & Ehren, 2024).

One of the fundamental convictions of social constructivists is nested in the significant role played by context and prior learning in education. By acknowledging, appreciating, and taking into consideration the tools which students bring along to the learning environment, social constructivism plays an important role in fostering the values and ethos of social inclusion and advancing it in higher education. We therefore argue that based on this theoretical foundation, social constructivism can foster a warm, friendly welcome learning space in which students feel welcome and valued with a sense of belonging, resulting in realistic prospects of social inclusion. Another important contribution of social constructivism towards the realisation of a socially inclusive higher education system is its appreciation of the unique individual experiences of students and the influence such experiences have on learning (Knapp, 2019 and Geels, 2020).

By calling for the socialisation of teaching and learning as jointly submitted by Geels, (2020) Al-Qaysi, Mohamad-Nordin and Al-Emran, (2021) Saleem, Kausar and Deeba, (2021), social constructivism plays an important role in making the assimilation, adaptation, and adjustment of students from diverse social backgrounds, with diverse social identities a flawless and simple process, thereby promoting social inclusion in higher education. Consistent with the above, Hwang and Jeong, (2021) posit that social constructivism does not only advance the importance of social context and culture in apprehending reality and the world but also maintains that students create reality through their interactions with other people and construct meaning from their experiences and encounters with people in various settings. These assumptions are a critical ideology underpinning the idea of social inclusion in higher education.

As conceptualised by Lombardo and Kantola (2021), social constructivism advocates for the social construction and reproduction of reality in human contexts. The study regards this view as important in promoting real sustainable social inclusion in higher education. In emphasising this theoretical position, Lombardo and Kantola (2021) further argue that social constructivism is grounded in a social ontology which rejects the existence of human agents outside their social contexts and its collaboratively and conventionally shared meanings. It is quite evident that these theoretical submissions epitomise the core values and ideologies underpinning the concept of social inclusion in higher education. Most importantly, by locating the student at the centre of educational practice and provision, social constructivism reminds those involved in pedagogy, curriculum design and curriculum implementation that higher education can not do anything about students without their involvement in those initiatives.

The study argues for and envisages more practical opportunities for real social inclusion in a learning dispensation in which pedagogical decisions and practices are informed by the unique individual needs and social identities of students occupying those spaces. However, in advocating for the compatibility of social constructivism with the current study, it must be underscored that its underlying assumptions ought to be used more as guidelines to inform pedagogy in educational practice and provision than in the formulation of policies which seek to promote and advance social inclusion in higher education.

Noting the compelling nature of the foregoing submissions about social constructivism (Hwang & Jeong, 2021; Jung, 2019; Lombardo & Kantola, 2021; Knapp, 2019; Geels, 2020; Al-Qaysi, Mohamad-Nordin, & Al-Emran, 2021; Saleem, Kausar, & Deeba, 2021), this study regards social constructivism as a pedagogical approach than as a learning theory that can be

used to promote and enhance social inclusion. From a pedagogical perspective, this theory is therefore anticipated to contribute substantially in defining and informing the learning experiences of students within the immediate context of social inclusion in higher education.

Literature review and situational analysis

Included in this section of literature review and situational analysis of the study is the conceptualisation of social inclusion from various ideological positions, the theoretical framework underpinning the study and the literature perspectives on social inclusion in higher education.

Conceptualisation of social inclusion in higher education

In this study, we argue that calls for social inclusion precede some form of social exclusion towards a certain group of people. Against this claim, it is thus imperative to pose some thought-provoking scaffolded questions to add to the ongoing discussions and research on this divisive issue of social inclusion in higher education. Henceforth, the study asks: Who has been socially excluded from higher education? In what ways have they been socially excluded? What are they being socially excluded from? Why have they been socially excluded? These questions are neither political nor rhetoric, but they are significant in enhancing ones' understanding and articulation of the state of social inclusion in higher education. The study will attempt to answer these questions, however, not in an explicit style.

Social inclusion in higher education has been explored in diverse contexts from a global perspective in many developing and developed countries. Among others, these countries include Zimbabwe (Shava, Chasokela, & Mangena, 2024), Australia (Gale & Hodge, 2017), the United Kingdom, the United States of America (Basit & Tomlinson,2012), South Africa (Jansen, 2017, Letsekha, 2022 and most recently, Mapuya, 2024, Chaka, 2024, Ndlangamandla, 2024; Langeveldt & Pietersen, 2024), America, New Zealand and Pakistan (Sheppard, 2021). Agreeing with the above, Kottmann, Vossensteyn, Kolster, Veidemane, Blasko, Biagi and Sánchez-Barrioluengo (2019) add that the social dimension of higher education has dominated research and conversations in recent years. In support of the above, Shava, et al (2024) contend that issues of access and social inclusion remain important themes in the ongoing educational research and discourses in higher education.

While the concept of social inclusion has been used in different contexts to convey different socially inclined meanings, research demonstrates that in all these contexts, it has consistently carried some political connotations (Wesselmann, Bradley, Taggart, & Williams, 2023; Kwok, & Treiblmaier, 2022; Ozili, 2023; Sheppard, 2021; Jabeen & Khan, 2022; Xie, Cao, Li, Yang, & Yu, 2022; Rawal, 2008; Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010; Coombs, Nicholas, & Pirkis, 2013; Silver, 2015; Allman, 2013; Hayes, Gray, & Edwards, 2008). Another observation which one frequently comes across in literature perspectives is that the concept of social inclusion is rhetoric since it is usually used for political relevance to gain public sympathy (O'Shea et al. 2016; Hughes, 2014).To provide some valuable insights into the meaning of social inclusion in higher education, it is perhaps necessary to consider the collective views of Shava et al. (2024) and Kottmann et al. (2019) who concur that central to these discourses of social inclusion has been the urgent need to widen and increase opportunities for access and successful completion of studies by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Thus, the proponents of social inclusion in higher education seek to advance an education system which is based on fairness, equity and equality in all matters related to higher education in its entirety. This analysis is consistent with the submissions of Whiteford, (2017), Atanasova and Papen, (2025), Winter, Webb, and Turner, (2024) and Altes, Willemse, Goei, and Ehren, (2024) who agree that from a general perspective, social inclusion in the context of education

implies that all the educational needs of students are satisfied , that all students have equal access to learning environments, including teaching and learning resources and that they can participate equally and actively to succeed in their studies (What have they been socially excluded from?). Shava, et al. (2024) further argue that the idea of a socially inclusive higher education system is not only hinged on access to education but is also about the provision of quality learning environments and pedagogical practices which provide students with learning opportunities while appreciating and considering their realities.

With diversity being one of the significant values underlying the educational policies of many countries, this study argues that social inclusion further means that diversity is not regarded as a problem, but as an important opportunity for learning, a kind of learning which is tailor-made to suit the various student identities in higher education. For this reason, Kottmann, et al. (2019) argue that the concept of social inclusion which has also been oftenly regarded as the social dimension of higher education refers to the widening and increasing of participation and access to higher education and success in course completion for students from underrepresented social groups (What have they been socially excluded from?). On the other hand, Whiteford (2017) views social inclusion as initiatives meant to increase the representation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Who has been socially excluded?). However, this perception can be criticised for being narrow and short-sighted.

Hence, this paper argues that representation does not necessarily mean participation and participation does not automatically translate to success in higher education. As such, this study takes a much broader, pragmatic and holistic view of the concept of social inclusion to include equal access, equal opportunities to participate, and equal opportunities for success in higher education. The position adopted by the study is in line with the sentiments of Shava et al. (2024) who suggest that social inclusion in higher education extends beyond the simple elimination of prejudices and biases towards minorities (In what ways have they been socially excluded?) but rather, represents a more complex and broader agenda which seeks the complete inclusion and participation of students in the higher education processes holistically. It implies the inclusion of students who were not previously represented in higher education.

Subscribing to the above submissions, Basit and Tomlinson, (2012) argue that the politics of access in higher education has been largely centred on the language of social equity and students from minority ethnic groups. In the same breadth, Whiteford (2017) supports the earlier observations of Basit and Tomlinson (2012) who found that there has been no interest on what really happens to these students once they are in institutions of higher learning. It is for this reason that this study includes academic success and course completion as an integral component of social inclusion in higher education. With access being a significant indicator of social inclusivity, this study argues that access goes beyond accessing the curriculum in one's preferred language, but it also includes access to educational resources and facilities that are necessary for students to experience success in their studies. However, given the politics, the current capacity of institutions of higher education, the fierce competition for access, the limited resources and geographical factors impacting on access, social inclusion will remain an elusive educational concept in higher education for the very same cohort of students which it seeks to serve.

The study will now proceed to present a picture of the state of social inclusion in higher education in various educational dispensations across the globe.

Social inclusion in higher education: perspectives on meaning and current state

In this paper, we argue that the concept of social inclusion in higher education cannot be isolated from access, quality, equity and success. It is therefore imperative to provide a contemporary view of these concepts from a historical and current perspective. Shava et al. (2024) support the earlier views of Rawal (2008) and further argue that these concepts have been explored from a host of different ideological persuasions. For Gidley, Hampson and

Wheeler, (2010) the concepts of access, active participation and academic success represent the extent of social inclusion which is underlined by a well embedded spectrum of persuasions of social justice, neoliberalism and human potential beliefs, providing the most embracing point narrative.

Looking at the concept of quality, Shava et al. (2024) argues that it is positioned as a nested generic concept while success and access are regarded as central concepts in the social dimension of higher education, supported by the concept of equal participation. O'Shea, et al (2015), Hughes, (2014) and Mampaey (2017) collectively interpret the intertwined concepts of access, participation, and success to represent the extent of social inclusion that is entrenched in the ideals of social justice, neoliberalism and human potential. Shava et al. (2024) note that within the context of higher education, the nexus between the concepts of equitable access, success, and quality is complex and multi-faceted and can be interpreted differently, subject to the underlying ideology of the discourse.

On the other hand, quality is to some extent equated with success, especially in the context of achievement and other related indicators of academic success. Thus, the idea of social inclusion in higher education is intimately connected with the concepts of equitable access and success. Shava et al. (2024) support this line of thought and further argue that access to higher education demands both quality and equity, two concepts which complement each other but coin the idea of fairness in different ways. Equity is grounded on the principle of fairness which argues that every person deserves equal opportunities to access and participate in higher education.

Whiteford (2017) endorses the earlier views of Gidley et a.l (2010) that within the agenda of social inclusion in higher education, initiatives to deepen and widen access to higher education seek to improve opportunities for access to higher education for all. For Shava et al. (2024), inspired by the increased massification in higher education and demand from all sectors of society, these initiatives seek to improve access and equity for students from historically marginalised backgrounds such as ethnic minorities, students from low socio-economic status, students with disabilities and students from rural areas.

Having unpacked the concepts which are imbedded in social inclusion, it is important to state that in exploring the state of social inclusion in higher education as a sector, it is worthwhile to provide a national and global perspective. Nationally, the rich tapestry of higher education in South Africa is intertwined with decolonisation discourses and progressive legislation, however, woven into this narrative is a stark picture of social injustice, social exclusion, and inequality (Langeveldt & Pietersen, 2024, Leathern, 2025; the Council on Higher Education, 2022, 2023 and 2024; Jansen, 2017; Letsekha, 2022). The sentiments emerging from empirical and theoretical studies in South Africa point to very little to no progress in some instances towards the full realisation of a socially inclusive higher education system.

Despite this assertion, Shava, Chasokela and Mangena (2024) observed a phenomenal advance in calls for socially inclusive education across the globe since the international world declarations on higher education for all. On the contrary, in their examination of lecturers' perceptions of inclusive pedagogies and social inclusion in the Australian higher education system, O'Shea et al. (2015) discovered some deep and serious deficiencies in the actual implementation and real practice of social inclusion. This confirmed the earlier findings of Hughes (2014) who concluded that the idea of social inclusion in higher education remain rhetoric in many universities across the globe.

Corroborating the above views on the current state of social inclusion in higher education, Mampaey (2017), cautions that despite the democratisation of higher education, students from poor socio-economic backgrounds remain underrepresented in higher education. In the event that these students get access to higher education, their course completion rates are relatively

lower when compared with other groups (Winter et al, 2024; Shava et al. 2024; Council on Higher Education, 2024 and 2023). Worse still, should they complete their studies, Mampaey (2017) argues that their qualifications are usually of less value since they studied at institutions of higher education which yield lower returns on investment.

Deliberating on the state of social inclusion in higher education, O'Shea et al. (2016) concur with Hughes, (2014) that while the idea of social inclusion has been widely accepted and embraced in higher education, its implementation and translation into inclusive practice still needs to see it day. In fact, for Hughes (2014) and Rawal, (2008) institutions of higher learning have accepted social inclusion rhetorically. In agreement with this view, Mampaey (2017), argues that while social inclusion is a prominent value in higher education, the commitment to social inclusion by the public does not always translate to actual practices in higher education. In conclusion, Mampaey (2017), further laments that higher education is usually conceptualised as a system which maintains social exclusion owing to its discriminatory nature by selecting students according to a specified social classification. The above submissions have been recently endorsed by Shava et al. (2024) who noted a persistence of several challenges such as access, success and social inclusion despite the rapid increase in access to higher education in the recent years across the globe.

Drawing from the above literature perspectives, it is evident that the realisation of social inclusion in higher education calls for radical practices which among others, include culturally sensitive and student-centred pedagogies, less selective recruitment, and evaluation of students, mentoring and community service learning. Social inclusion means that universities adopt recruitment policies which are less selective, offer students from poor social background financial support and study guidance.

Approach used to obtain data

To explore the state of social inclusion in higher education through the lens of the students' phenomenological experiences, the study adopted a phenomenological research design, underpinned by the methodological assumptions of interpretivism. As a philosophy in research, phenomenology provides a theoretical lens for researchers to comprehend a specific phenomenon from the lived experiences of the study participants (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017). It is for this assumption that a phenomenological research design was found to be compatible with the study. Furthermore, the study argues that phenomenology has the potential to provide accurate credible data which is based on the participants' experiences and devoid of researcher bias, especially when there is triangulation in the data collection process. Consistent with the phenomenological research design is the assumption of interpretivism that reality is a result of one's interpretation of their experiences with the physical world (Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Tshabangu, 2015; Berg and Lune, 2012).

Random sampling was used to select a group of sixty 4th year student teachers from all three departments of the Faculty of Education. This was meant to have a more accurate representation of the student population at the fourth-year level. This specific cohort was targeted based on seniority in higher education. It was envisaged that at 4th year level, they would have experienced more of the selected indicators of social inclusivity and would therefore be able to make an informed score and meaningful contribution to the study. Guided by literature perspectives on the practical indicators of social inclusivity in higher education, the study identified distinguishable and distinctive indicators of social inclusion which are captured in the questionnaire below. Reflecting on their phenomenological experiences with each of the social inclusive indicator below, the participants had to score them on a Seven Point Frequency Scale from 1 (Never) to 7 (Every time).

The development of the questionnaire and its administration were grounded in the philosophical and methodological orientations of phenomenology and interpretivism as propounded by Denzin and Lincoln, (2011), Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017), Nieuwenhuis (2016) and Tshabangu (2015). Thus, to conform to the assumptions of phenomenology and interpretivism, the students had to interpret how they experienced each indicator of social inclusion and express that interpretation numerically using the values on the Seven Point Frequency Scale from 1 (Never) to 7 (Every time). Below in Table 1.1 is the distribution of raw scores per social inclusive indicator.

Table 1 **Distribution of Scores**

Key:

Every Time	Usually	Frequently	Sometimes	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

SOCIAL INCLUSION INDICATOR		FREQUENCY PER SOCIAL INCLUSION INDICATOR						
		7	6	5	4	3	2	1
SII1	I feel comfortable and welcome in the learning environment	10	4	7	16	13	6	4
SII2	The learning environment conforms to my personal social identity	9	7	11	21	6	3	3
SII3	I access the curriculum in my preferred language	3	3	5	7	9	11	22
SII4	I participate in the learning environment in my preferred language	4	4	5	7	10	13	17
SII5	I can do assessment in my preferred language	3	3	4	8	11	13	18
SII6	I can consult with my lecturer in my preferred language	4	6	7	7	9	11	16
SII7	As students, we are all given equal opportunities to learn and participate in the learning environment in our preferred language	3	4	6	8	11	13	15
SII8	As students, we are all given equal opportunities to pass	3	3	7	9	10	13	15
SII9	My prior knowledge is taken into consideration in the learning environment	27	12	11	5	3	2	0
SII10	I am satisfied with the state of social inclusivity at my university	3	5	7	8	10	13	14
SII11	I feel comfortable with the technology used by lecturers	18	12	10	8	6	4	2
SII12	I am comfortable to navigate through the learning platforms used by lecturers	19	14	10	7	4	3	3

The raw data above was captured on an excel spreadsheet and analysed using the SPSS software. Descriptive Statistics were generated from this quantitative analysis, thereby delivering Measures of Central Tendency (the mean, median, mode and standard deviation). These quantitative results are presented below in Table 1.2

*Table 2 **Descriptive Statistics: Analysis of Distribution of Scores***

Descriptive Statistics: Measures of Central Tendency		SII1	SII2	SII3	SII4	SII5	SII6	SII7	SII8	SII9	SII10	SII11	SII12
N	Valid	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60	60
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		4,1333	4,5167	2,7167	2,9667	2,8000	3,2000	3,0167	3,0167	5,8167	3,2000	5,1333	5,2667
Median		4,0000	4,0000	2,0000	2,5000	2,0000	3,0000	3,0000	3,0000	6,0000	3,0000	5,5000	6,0000
Mode		4,00	4,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	7,00	1,00[a]	7,00	7,00
Std.		1,77044	1,58907	1,82350	1,87731	1,75441	1,95544	1,78972	1,77068	1,39602	1,82078	1,76084	1,76469
a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown													

These statistical results below will now be analysed and discussed below in detail, with reference to the qualitative findings emerging from the focus group interviews as a triangulation technique.

Analysis and discussion of empirical data or information acquired

Since the study was predominantly quantitative, the analysis and discussion of data will begin with the quantitative findings and then interrogate them with the qualitative verdicts emerging from the focus group interviews. It is important to highlight that all the participants were asked to be honest and truthful with their experiences on the state of social inclusion in higher education with each one of the social inclusive indicators. While all the scores are based on the students' interpretation of their unique individual experiences in the learning environment, there is sufficient persuasive quantitative evidence pointing to a sense of agreement among the study participants that social inclusion remains a matter of serious concern in higher education.

The quantitative findings as corroborated by the qualitative verdicts of students point to a very grim picture on the state of social inclusion in higher education. With a mean of less than 3.0 on all the indicators of access to the curriculum, (SII3, SII4, SII5 and SII6) it can be concluded that the majority of students still struggle to access the curriculum in a language of their own choice. This finding finds expression in the means for SII3, SII4, SII5 and SII6 pertaining to the students' experiences in using their preferred language in accessing the curriculum in their preferred language (SII3), participating in the learning environment (SII4), doing assessment in their preferred language (SII5) and doing consultations in their preferred language (SII6) which are all below 3 (occasionally). The qualitative implications of the means for these social inclusion indicators (SII3, SII4, SII5 and SII6) is that students rarely use their preferred languages as far as those indicators are concerned. This corroborates the submissions of Tavares, (2024), Mapuya, (2023), Ndlangamandla, (2024) and Xu and Fang, (2024) which report the dominant use of a second language (English) in higher education at the expense of the students' preferred languages.

The qualitative findings from the focus group interviews are also in harmony with the above prognosis on language as a core indicator of social inclusivity in higher education. Confirming this finding, participant C5 remembered: *"Every time I wanted to share my views with my fellow classmates, I was discouraged by the thought of having to do so in perfect English, knowing very well that English never loved me. I still blame the system for not allowing me to engage in those class discussions using Setswana"* (Setswana is the most spoken indigenous language in the Northern Cape Province in South Africa and is therefore a preferred

language for many students in that province). *Alluding to the above, participant E5 recalled " Sometimes I would feel like raising up my hand to participate and would reprimand myself for feeling that way only because the English was not Englishing".*

It is quite plausible that those participants who rated SII3 to SII6 highly on language as an important indicator of social inclusivity have this preferred language as one of their major subjects. By default, this would enable them to access the curriculum (SII3), participate in the learning environment (SII4), do assessment (SII5) and consult their lecturers (SII6) in that preferred language they are majoring in. The study also found that students could consult their lecturers in their preferred languages (SII6) because those lecturers were fluent in that specific language and not necessarily teaching it. It is therefore misleading to take this as a true reflection of the state of social inclusion in higher education.

The quantitative results for SII1 and SII2 also demonstrate that the learning environment is not that as socially inclusive as students would want it to be. This is evidenced by the respective means of 4.1 and 4.5, implying that students sometimes feel comfortable and welcome in the learning environment (SII1) and that the learning environment sometimes conforms to their personal social identities (SII2). This finding supports the earlier shared observations and sentiments of Wesselmann, Bradley, Taggart, and Williams, (2023) Ozili, (2023), Kottmann et al. (2019) Shava et al. (2024) and Whiteford (2017) that higher education still needs to be sufficiently transformed to provide for a diverse student community.

The qualitative verdicts emerging from the focus group interviews also sustain this finding. Evidence to this effect can be found in the views of participant B3, who reflected: *" To be honest guys, I always felt lost in class, it has always been intimidating to me, especially in my first and second years of studies".* The frequency distribution and score of "sometimes" (4) on the core indicators of the social inclusiveness of the learning environment (SII1: I feel comfortable and welcome in the learning environment and SII2: The learning environment conforms to my personal social identity) does not inspire confidence on the current state of social inclusion in higher education. However, this vindicates the concerns raised by Shava et al. (2024), O'Shea et al. (2016) and Mampaey (2017) regarding a higher education system which is still not socially inclusive.

Agreeing with the quantitative findings on SII1 and SII2, participant A1 recalled, *"I had to adopt an everchanging and evolving personality, depending on the prevailing circumstances and the people around me. In some instances, I had to resemble three different personalities during our group discussions. I was not easy sir, giving up who you are and your real social identity just to conform to a certain type of social group was the greatest kind of self-inflicted torture"*

While these phenomenological reflections paint a very sad picture on the state of social inclusion in higher education, they represent the manifestation of the concept of adaptation as pioneered by Piaget (1976) in his theory of assimilation, accommodation, adaptation, and equilibration. These findings confirm the ability of human beings to adjust and adapt to new situations and experiences as submitted by Piaget (Walsh, 2024). Being in a one-sided learning environment , students had not choice but to adjust and adapt. This confirms the challenges faced by students, especially first year students related to transition and adjustment into higher education which are well documented in research (Haktanir, Watson, Ermis-Demirtas, Karaman, Freeman, Kumaran, & Streeter,2021; Pedler, Willis, & Nieuwoudt, 2021; Masika & Jones, 2015; McLean, Gaul, & Penco, 2023).

Another outstanding result from this study is the level of agreement among students on the thoughtful planning and preparation lecturers put in before lesson presentations. The standard deviation for SII9 (My prior knowledge is taken into consideration in the learning environment) is 1,39602, which is below 1.5. This signifies a sense of concurrence among students that their prior knowledge is taken into consideration in the learning environment.

This finding on SII9 can be attributed to the lecturer's teaching competency where every attempt is made to satisfy the pedagogical demands of generic lesson planning. The study argues that by virtue of them being involved in initial teacher training and development and in teaching practice assessments, these lecturers have to lead by example and demonstrate the generic elements of lesson presentation. As such, they take into consideration the prior learning of students, which is baseline assessment.

Students seem to be polarized when it comes to their ratings of the eleven of the given social inclusivity indicators in higher education. This is quantitatively supported by the standard deviation of these eleven social inclusion indicators which can be easily rounded off to 2.0(SII1:1,77044,SII2:1,58907,SII3:1,82350,SII4:1,87731,SII5:1,75441, SII6:1,95544, SII7: 1,78972, SII8:1,77068,SII10:1,82078,SII11:1,76084 and SII12:1,76469). Statistically, a standard deviation of almost 2.0 demonstrates fundamental differences on the students' reflections of their phenomenological experiences with each on of these social inclusion indicators. However, this finding is not surprising, for it can be attributed to the rich diversity in the student population, noting that these students come from different social backgrounds. Accessing higher education from various social contexts and identities, students will not always share similar experiences when it comes to issues of social inclusion. Therefore, the study argues that looking at social inclusion in higher education from multiple ideological orientations and social contexts delivers some quite diverse and sometimes parallel views.

The participants' scores on the two statements concerning the use of digital technology in higher education and its implications on social inclusion, SII11 (I feel comfortable with the technology used by lecturers) and SII12 (I am comfortable to navigate through the learning platforms used by lecturers) delivered a mode of 7,0. This implies that students at all times feel comfortable with the technology used by lecturers and that they are comfortable to navigate through the learning platforms used by lecturers all times. It can be argued convincingly that these are the gains from the forced use and incorporation of digital methodologies and information and communication technology that was amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, which was their first year in higher education.

The quantitative and qualitative findings produced in this study demonstrate that higher education in South Africa is yet to deliver such a socially inclusive system which is practically driven by and grounded in the ideologies, values and ethos of access, fairness, equality and success. One of the major findings emerging from this study is that students are very much aware about issues of social inclusion and its implications on pedagogy, educational practice and provision. The students demonstrated a sense of shared awareness and understanding of social inclusion in higher education.

Limitations of the study

The limitations of this study stem from its methodological orientation. There is no doubt that the study has yielded some significant benefits from its epistemological and methodological foundations. However, being a mixed methods study, the size of the study sample could have been increased to mitigate and compensate for the methodological demands of both a qualitative and quantitative study. Given the scope and breadth of higher education, a study sample of 60 participants is not methodologically enough to satisfy the quantitative aspect of the study. Therefore, this could only have been an entirely qualitative study. However, the triangulation which comes with the qualitative data validates the quantitative findings and gives them more credibility. The study could also have explored the state of social inclusion in higher education from a lecturers' phenomenological perspective. This call is made because lecturers are regarded as key stakeholders and gatekeepers in issues of social inclusion

in higher education. This submission is also corroborated by the questionnaire whose items all evolve around the lecturer and the learning environment.

Conclusions and recommendations

The conclusions of this study and its recommendations are entirely based on its findings and the limitations. As such, the following conclusions and recommendations are submitted:

Conclusions

The current study sought to explore the state of social inclusion in Higher Education, drawing from students' phenomenological experiences. Reflecting on their phenomenological experiences, the students are unanimous that there are key qualifiers of social inclusion in higher education which still need to be truly transformed. As it stands, higher education has not been sufficiently transformed for social inclusion. Thus, a major finding emerging from this study is that while there is adequate primary and secondary legislation which is put in place to provide for social inclusion, social justice, equity and equality in higher education, there is a serious lack of implementation of these policies for them to achieve their primary objectives in practice. Most students from previously disadvantaged social backgrounds still feel marginalised and excluded in many ways.

Recommendations

Drawing from the above limitations and conclusions, the study recommends a more purposeful implementation, monitoring and evaluation of polices and legislation which specifically seek to promote and deliver social inclusion in higher education. As a monitoring and evaluation tool, students can be given quarterly anonymous online surveys in which they score specific indicators of social inclusion in their various modules. Findings from these surveys can be used to guide improvement plans. Lecturers play a significant role in promoting social inclusion in higher education. As such, it is recommended that they are provided with the necessary training and workshops on how to create a socially inclusive learning environment. Given the depth and comprehensiveness of the current legislation on social inclusion in higher education, the study finds no logic in developing new policies on social inclusion. Instead, the study strongly recommends the shared development, uncompromising implementation, and strict continuous monitoring of a shared set of social inclusion indicators in higher education.

It is also recommended to direct more focus and attention on implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the existing polices and legislation on social inclusion and intervention where and when necessary. In addition, the study recommends regular face to face interviews with students on the state of social inclusion in their various learning environments. To the effect of the above submissions, an independent task team can be developed which will work hand in hand with the institutions of higher education and the relevant governments organs. As a custodiam of higher education, the government need to play an active leading role and involvement in promoting sustainable social inclusion in higher education. Given the above discourses, the study submits that full realisation of social inclusion in higher education requires the political will and active involvement of all the stakeholders from various political and social persuasions.

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