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A Reflection on the Challenge of Food Insecurity among Students from Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Backgrounds in Public Universities in South Africa

Abstract

Food is a basic necessity of life for all human beings including students. As per Maslow' hierarchy of needs, this basic necessity has to be fulfilled before students can start to aspire for knowledge and intellectual self-actualisation. Therefore, food insecurity, defined as 'limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways', is a serious limiting factor to the educational pursuits of students. Food insecurity is an increasing phenomenon among students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds globally, including in South Africa. This piece of *Briefly Speaking* reflects on the challenge of food insecurity among students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in public universities in South Africa. It traces this challenge to the post-apartheid expansion of access to universities to students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds without concomitantly providing them with adequate financial support to cover not only tuition fees and the cost of books, but also the costs of food and other basic necessities of life. Because such students come from households that cannot afford to supplement the amounts of government student loans and/or bursaries, they are increasingly exposed to the risk of food insecurity both with and/or without hunger. It is observed that the Covid-19 nation-wide lockdown dispensation exacerbated the challenge of food insecurity among the students, thereby highly affecting their chances of success in their higher education studies. This piece of Briefly *Speaking* calls for more research on food insecurity among students, as well as for deepening the discourse on food insecurity as one of the key factors that limit the chances of student success in higher education in the country.

Keywords: Food insecurity, higher education, human needs, public universities, socioeconomically disadvantaged, student success

Introduction

Higher education, like other sectors across the world, has undergone significant adjustments and transitions during the years following the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic forced countries to put in place measures aimed at controlling its spread (Nadig and Krishna, 2020). The most notable of these measures was the lockdown of countries,

which entailed restricting movement of people except for essential workers. This meant higher education institutions could not function in the manner they were hitherto accustomed to. In South Africa, following the presidential announcement of a nation-wide lockdown in March 2020, all higher education institutions had to shut down and students were sent back to their respective homes, with some institutions giving students as little as 72 hours to vacate campuses and student residences (Hendricks and Chirume, 2020). This created pandemonium and anxiety among both students and academic staff who were concerned about how they would proceed with teaching and learning. While there appeared to be a 'plan B' in place for teaching and learning through the shift from traditional face-to-face to online learning modality, the option turned out not to be a perfect solution to addressing the teaching and learning needs of many students.

Much has been written about the emergency remote teaching and learning arrangements that were adopted during the lockdown period (Verma and Prakash, 2020; Haleem *et al*., 2020; Aristovnik *et al*., 2021). For example, issue number 14 of *Kagisano*, the research journal of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) carries articles on the resilience and agility demonstrated by higher education institutions by way of adopting emergency remote teaching and learning (CHE, 2022). Besides teaching and learning, there have also been debates and surveys on the psychosocial impact of Covid-19 on students, as well as on the academic hardships that Covid-19 induced among students in higher education (Farnell *et al*., 2021; Tasso *et al*., 2021). However, there were other equally daunting challenges that came to the fore during the time, and which have not been written about extensively. One such challenge is that of food insecurity among higher education students. This issue of *Briefly Speaking* reflects on the challenge of food insecurity among public university students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in South Africa, with particular focus on the period during the Covid-19 nation-wide lockdown.

Unpacking key concepts

Food is a critical essential of human life, and sections 26 and 27 of Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) declare that access to food is a fundamental human right. The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO, 1996:2) defines food security as a situation whereby 'people at all times have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active healthy life'. The FAO (1996) then defines food insecurity as the condition that prevails in the absence of food security, which means it is a situation whereby people lack physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active healthy life. Payne-Sturges *et al*., (2018:2) define food insecurity as the 'limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways'. Henry (2017), citing the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), perceives food insecurity as multidimensional, encompassing reduced caloric intake, poor access to healthy food, lack of variety in diet,

hunger and/or famine, and reduced weight due to not consuming enough calories. On the other hand, Seligman *et al*., (2010) differentiate between two forms of food insecurity namely, food insecurity with hunger, and food insecurity without hunger. The former refers to situations whereby meals are inadequate, and there are concerns of possible malnutrition. Food insecurity without hunger occurs when there may be regular consumption of food, but the food concerned lacks in variety and quantity. The term 'food insecurity' therefore refers to situations that are characterised by both the presence of hunger (when food is insufficient in variety and quantity), and the absence of hunger (when food is available in sufficient quantities, but not of the type that provides a balanced assortment of nutrients).

In this piece of *Briefly Speaking*, the term 'socioeconomically disadvantaged' is used in the sense articulated by Whiteman (2014:96), which is that it refers to a condition of vulnerability emanating from a 'lack of resources to obtain the necessary types of diet, participate in activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which one belongs'. It is a condition of being socioeconomically deprived and/or marginalised.

Theoretical lenses used in the reflection

The Maslow hierarchy of needs and the Sen's capability approach are the two theoretical lenses that were used to reflect on the challenge of food insecurity among public university students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in South Africa, with particular focus on the period during the Covid-19 nation-wide lockdown. The Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory is a motivational theory that asserts that human beings have needs that can be categorised into various levels, from the basic, which are critical for human survival, to the higher ones which include security needs, love and belonging needs, self-esteem needs, and self-actualisation needs. The five-tier needs are further grouped into 'deficient needs' and 'growth needs'. The first four needs (physiological, safety, love and esteem) belong to the deficiency needs category, while self-actualisation belongs to the growth needs category. According to McCleod (2018:3),

> "Every person is capable and has a desire to move up the hierarchy towards the level of self-actualisation. Unfortunately, progress is often disrupted by failure to meet lower needs."

Therefore, meeting the needs at a lower level in the hierarchy is a prerequisite to developing the desire, and amassing sufficient courage to pursue the needs at the next level in the hierarchy.

According to Seligman *et al*. (2010), the matter of food insecurity lies at the core of the human basic needs. On the other hand, the need to develop intellectually through exposure to education fits into the definition of growth needs. Therefore, addressing and/or overcoming food insecurity takes precedence to developing intellectually through pursuing higher education qualifications. As such, the probability of fully realising this growth need could be compromised by the failure to realise the deficiency need of food security.

The other theoretical lens, the Sen's capability approach, focuses on the extent to which human beings can fully attain what they want to be and

do (Sen, 1993). The full realisation of capabilities, also referred to as 'functionings', depends on the availability of resources. The translation of the capability into 'functionings' is determined by personal, environmental and sociopolitical factors, referred to in the approach as conversion factors. Sen (1993) points out that the realisation of capabilities has much to do with real freedoms where individuals possess all necessary tools to achieve the goal of being and doing what they value. From point of view of the capability approach, and in the case of higher education students, the full and successful attainment of education would be considered as 'functionings' and the realisation of such 'functionings' would be dependent on the acquisition of knowledge, considered to be a capability. The ability to convert this knowledge resource into 'functionings' relies on conversion factors that could be personal, environmental or sociopolitical (Robeyns, 2021). Based on this theory, food insecurity would be considered a personal as well as a sociopolitical conversion factor.

Food insecurity in South Africa

According to the 2020 Food Insecurity Index (Economist Intelligence, 2021), South Africa has been classified as one of the countries performing moderately as far as food security is concerned. This is on a four-level scale of 'best performance', 'good performance', 'moderate performance' and 'needs improvement'. Countries classified into the 'moderate performance' and 'needs improvement' categories have sections of their population experiencing food insecurity at moderate and large scales, respectively. Moderate food insecurity is defined by Jesson *et al*., (2021: 687) as situations whereby people are uncertain about their ability to obtain food, and are forced to compromise on the quality and/ or quantity of the food they consume due to lack of money and other resources. Using a model based on 58 indicators that signify food security around the world, South Africa is positioned at 70 out of 113 countries. On the other hand, countries such as Algeria and Egypt pass as good performers in Africa as they are ranked at 57 out of 113 and 62 out of 113, respectively. Although South Africa may not be in worse situation regarding food insecurity compared to other sub-Saharan African countries such as Sudan or Malawi, which are ranked 112 out of 113 and 109 out of 113, respectively, nevertheless the issue of food insecurity is one that has an impact on the sections of the population. The Covid-19 only served to worsen the food insecurity situation among the people.

The government in South Africa is aware that, although access to sufficient food is a human right enshrined in the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), there are people in some parts of the population of the country, who are food insecure. To this end, the government has instituted programmes and initiatives to promote food security, particularly following the prioritisation of food security as a Millennium Development Goal (MDGs) (Hlongwane and Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). Fortunately, upon the expiry of the MDGs in 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with goals 1 and 2 that call for the end to hunger and poverty by 2030. These two SDGs effectively call for the elimination of food insecurity. Accordingly, governments, include that of South Africa, have continued to

develop and implement programmes aimed at eliminating food insecurity.

Among the sections of the population in South Africa that experience food insecurity challenges are learners in schools, and students in universities and other tertiary education colleges. The government has responded to their plight by instituting such initiatives such as the school feeding programmes (Sabi *et al.,* 2018) focusing mainly on primary and secondary school levels. However, there is no such government led initiative to eliminate food insecurity among higher education institutions. This is because it is generally assumed that higher education students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds receive financial assistance from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) which is believed to include a portion earmarked for subsistence. While the latter assumption is correct, the reality as Letseka (2007) points out, is that the subsistence portion of the NSFSAS funding is not sufficient to meet the food security requirements of the students. Adeniyi and Durojaye (2020: 3) confirm this observation as they write as follows:

> Whilst disadvantaged students from pre-school up to secondary school are entitled to daily meals under the National School Nutrition Programme.., this does not extend to students in tertiary institutions. As such students who were beneficiaries of the school-feeding programmes find themselves without food upon entry into university.

The situation described by Adeniyi and Durojaye (2020) above, has stimulated discussions and debates about food insecurity among students in higher education particularly following the 2015 #FeesMustFallmovement, when among the issues raised were the struggles that students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds encountered that deepened the levels of inequalities in higher education.

A global phenomenon with presence in South Africa

Food insecurity among higher education students is, sadly, a global phenomenon which is being increasingly observed even in countries that are considered developed. For example, Miceyski *et al*., (2014) describe how food insecurity in Australia is common among students in tertiary education institutions. Hughes *et al*., (2011) report the prevalence of food insecurity among 42% of the student population in Australia, where 17% of the students experience food insecurity without hunger, and 25% experience food insecurity with hunger. In the United States of America, Payne-Sturges *et al*., (2018) found that up to 15% of students in public universities experience food insecurity, with an additional 16% considered at risk of facing food insecurity. Ukegbu *et al*., (2019) reveal that there is an 80.7% prevalence of food insecurity among university students in Nigeria, which is higher than Nigeria's national food household food insecurity prevalence of around 70%.

In South Africa, studies among students in public universities have reported food insecurity prevalence rates of between 11% and 38.3% (Devereux, 2021). The prevalence rates vary from one institution to another. They also vary in terms of the level or degree of food insecurity. For instance, in a study at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Sabi *et al*., (2020) discovered that over 53% of students

experienced some form of food insecurity ranging from moderate to high levels of food insecurity. A study by van den Burg and Raubenheimer (2015) at the University of the Free State discovered that up to 60% of students experience food insecurity with hunger, while another 26% experience food insecurity without hunger.

Although Miceyski *et al*., (2014) attributed the challenges of food insecurity among students in Australia to the students' process of transitioning from being dependent on the family during their pre-university years, to becoming independent university students, globally the main cause is poverty and deprivation. In most parts of the world, the higher education students that are at risk of experiencing food insecurity are predominantly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2015). Zungu (2022) confirmed the same pattern in South Africa as observed at the University of the Witwatersrand's School of Education, where the struggle with food insecurity is prevalent among students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. His study revealed that even among recipients of the NSFAS funding, the amounts that they receive in financial aid are not sufficient to cater for their basic needs such as food and accommodation. Some of the students admitted to sending a portion of their NSFAS grant money back home to support their families. Such students indicated that going without some meals was something that they had become accustomed to (Zungu, 2022). Presenting at a colloquium on access to food for students in South African tertiary institutions in 2020, the former Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of the Western Cape, who is the current Vice-Chancellor at the Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein, observed the prevalence of student food insecurity among those coming from highly impoverished backgrounds (Adeniyi *et al*., 2018).

Food insecurity among public university student in South Africa

Most public universities in South Africa identified the challenge of food insecurity during the drive to widen access to higher education which saw the doors to universities being opened to many students from historically disadvantaged and marginalised communities. Most of them were funded by government through the Tertiary Education Financial Aid Scheme of South Africa (TEFSA) and later the NSFAS. However, it was discovered right from the onset that the funding provided was not sufficient to cater for basic needs such as food, transport and accommodation for those who were admitted to institutions that were located far away from the homes of their parents. As Adeneyi and Durojaye (2020) observed, these students were dependent on parents who themselves do not have enough resources to pass around. In this case, the students' situations back at home are in no way any better than what they experience while at university.

According to Zungu (2020), when the students find themselves in the situation described above, most of them are forced to prioritise quantity over quality when buying food stuffs for themselves. They exclude foodstuffs such as vegetables and fruits, as well as other nutritious foods from their food budgets because they cannot afford them. This creates a situation of food insecurity without hunger (Henry, 2017). Some studies revealed that while most of these students may not have been

hungry, most of them would have been severely malnourished, overweight and obese due to the intake of high energy content food stuffs that are deficient in nutrition, but which are affordable compared to the low energy, highly nutritious foods that are expensive, for instance fruits and vegetables (Gooding *et al*, 2011; Kaisser and Veldman, 2013).

Informed by the situation described above, several public universities developed and started to implement intervention programmes to alleviate food insecurity among students. For instance, the Gender Equity Unit Food Programme (GEUFP) at the University of the Western Cape, took responsibility for supplying students with food parcels for the entire duration of the academic year (Firfrey and Carolissen, 2010). Similarly, the University of the Witwatersrand, University of Pretoria, and University of Johannesburg are reported to be taking steps towards addressing student food insecurity through initiatives such as distributing dry-produce food packs to food insecure students; and providing meal vouchers that cater for the students' dietary needs (Adeneyi and Durojaye, 2020).

Exacerbating effect of Covid-19 nation-wide lockdown

The nation-wide lockdown in the wake of Covid-19 exacerbated the situation of food insecurity among students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in public universities in South Africa. Firstly, when the institutions closed because of the lockdown, the institution-based intervention programmes of alleviating food insecurity among students were also suspended. This means the students were left at the mercy of food insecurity without assistance. Secondly, the students were directed to vacate student residences on campuses. Some who had no money to pay for transport back to their rural households, had to squatter with friends in private student residences, or with friends and relatives in towns and townships. Thirdly, most people lost their sources of income as businesses and industries closed. This means the students would have been squatting with friends and relatives most of whom would have also been in dire straits financially owing to the loss of their sources of income. The same was the experience of those who managed to travel to their parents' homes, because some of the parents lost their sources of income following the closure of businesses and industries. Although the government made efforts through the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) to provide relief grants to the unemployed, the R350 monthly relief grant per person did very little in addressing the challenges of most food insecure households that were already characterised by large families (Hart *et al*., 2022). Fourthly, universities pivoted to remote teaching modes which meant that students needed to have sufficient loads of connectivity data to access the learning materials placed on digital platforms. This added another dimension to the financial distress that the students were already experiencing. The net effect of all these interrelated factors was the further reduction of finances earmarked for food and nutrition with the consequent increase in the prevalence rates of food insecurity among the students. The type of food insecurity also increasingly became that of food insecurity with hunger. Therefore, the Covid-19 nation-wide lockdown, and the resultant discontinuation of food security interventions by universities following the closure of campuses,

compounded the scale and intensity of a challenges that existed before Covid-19.

Naidoo and Catwright (2022) described how various institutional structures including student counselling units, institutional management, and student leadership bodies in liaison with departments of social work and agriculture in the provinces attempted to develop and implement emergency interventions to alleviate food insecurity among the university students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Naidoo and Catwright, 2022: 366). However, most of these efforts did not bear fruits because of the lockdown restrictions on movement, engagement and business transactions.

The effect of food insecurity on student success

Food is among the physiological needs that are at the base of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. These are the needs that determine survival of individuals and populations. They must be satisfied before the individual can satisfy the higher needs. As a basic human need, food is essential to fuel the bodies and minds of students, so that the students can have the necessary levels of energy and mental focus in their studies. Therefore, food insecurity is a serious impediment to the success of higher education students (Bruening *et al*., 2017). Henry (2017) argues that even with the motivation to work, hungry students lack concentration on their work, and the lack of energy and increased anxiety of where the next meal would come from have negative impact on students' performance. In her study, 30% of food insecure students reported a drop in their performance that they attributed to their food insecure situation. One of the respondents in the study described the struggles that she encountered in trying to concentrate on her educational studies when the stress of where to get the next meal lingered in her mind.

Sabi *et al*. (2018) indirectly link high dropout rates of students in higher education institutions to the challenges of food insecurity. Their study conducted at the University of KwaZulu Natal, established the correlation between students' state of food insecurity and their socio-economic backgrounds. The findings of the study informed the establishment of a Food Security Programme (FSP) at the institution. The debate on the correlation between food security and nutrition, on the one hand, and academic achievement on the other, has been ongoing. Florence *et al*. (2008), for example, established a positive correlation between students' ability to access sound nutrition, and an increased probability of them succeeding in their academic studies. Cady (2014) believes the prevalence of food insecurity among students is a contributing barrier to their wellbeing and success. The relationship between food insecurity with poorer nutrition and adverse outcomes such as high levels of stress and depression, according to Brueing *et al*. (2017), provides insight into linking these factors to negative academic outcomes.

The opportunity of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education is an important capability and functioning. As a capability, it allows them a chance of a lifetime to pursue a journey which, if successful, would have a potential of transforming their lives and increasing their chances of breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and attaining upward social mobility (Gofen, 2009). As a capability, by seizing the opportunity to study in higher

education, these students would realise their functionings through the acquisition of higher education qualifications such as degrees and diplomas. This realisation of functionings in Sen's capability approach corresponds with the realisation of self-actualisation, which is the highest growth need, in the Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. On the other hand, the realisation of the functioning could be adversely affected if the conversion factors such as food insecurity constrain the freedom to translate the capability of accessing higher education.

Wagner *et al*., (2024) discusses the nature of food insecurity among South African students during the pandemic and indicate that there was a significant increase in dropout rates between pre-Covid-19 and post-Covid-19, which, among other factors, was attributed to the prevailing food insecurity among students during the pandemic. The discontinuation of the distribution of food parcels and meals resulting from the lockdown worsened the effect of food insecurity on socio-economically disadvantaged students. The provision of balanced meals through institutional initiatives not only helped to alleviate food insecurity in general, but it also addressed the nutrition aspect of food insecurity, where student not only had food to eat, but it was ensured that the food met the nutritional needs of the students. Ranskind *et al*., (2019: 482) emphasise the importance of a balanced meal on students' academic achievement by arguing that food insecurity can be detrimental on student academic performance and health. The prevalence of food insecurity and stress in higher education contributes to the affected students being more likely to develop less ability to succeed in their studies because they are more likely to not attend classes, more likely to not participate in classes, and more likely to drop out.

Studies attest to the effects of food insecurity on academic performance. They assert that food insecurity leads students to develop anxiety, irritability and fatigue, all of which have negative impact on learning and academic performance (Silva *et al*., 2017). For socio-economically disadvantaged students, while learning could be considered necessary, the need for food overrides the competing need to learn (Martinez *et al*., 2020; Weaver *et al*., 2020). Figure 1 summarises the interplay between the student food insecurity situation during pre-Covid-19 period and during Covid-19 and the full realisation of attaining higher education as a functioning.

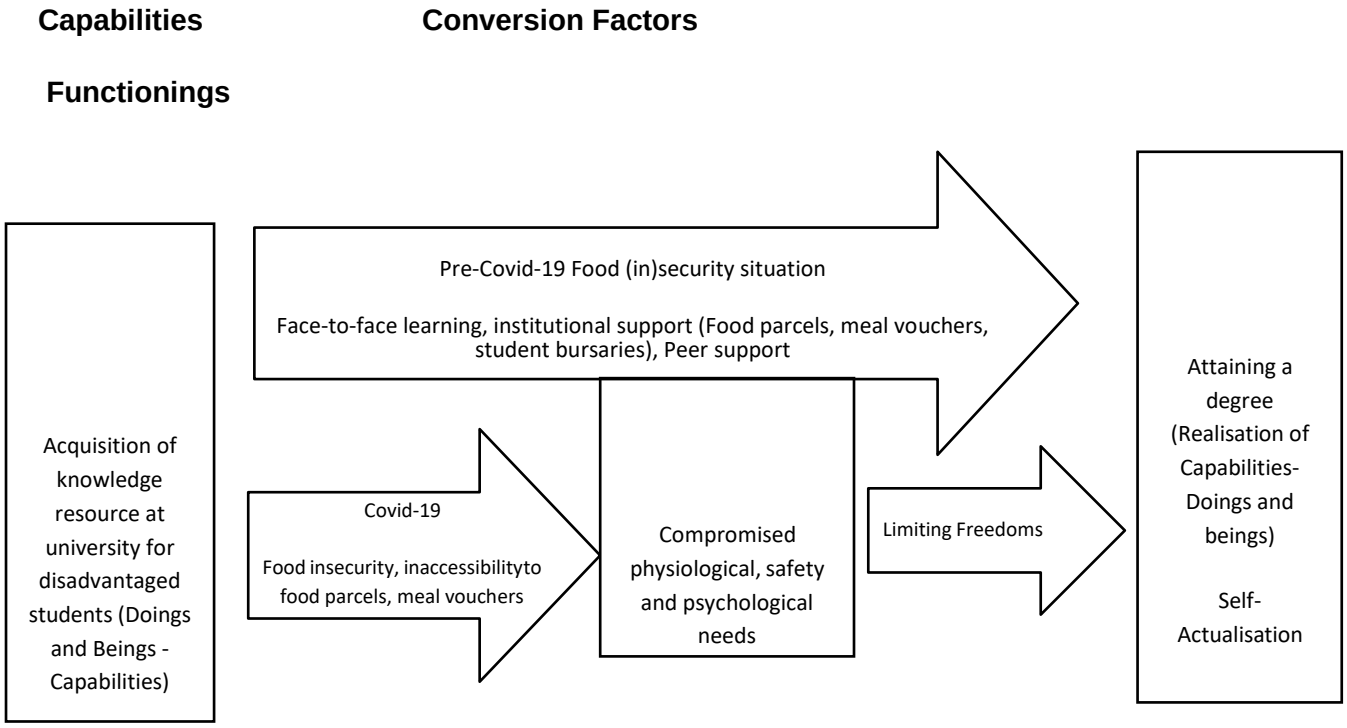

Figure 1: The Impact Food Insecurity on Student Success

In Figure 1 above, the acquisition of knowledge resource at higher education institutions is considered a capability by socio-economically disadvantaged students, most of whose aspirations to 'be and do' is to successfully complete their studies and improve their wellbeing through breaking away from the poverty vicious cycle. This capability is also the highest order of need in Maslow's hierarchy. In order to translate this capability into functionings (achieved capability), there are factors in between that would either enable the realisation of these aspirations or not. These are the conversion factors. In the context of this piece of *Briefly Speaking*, food (in)security is a major conversion factor. Before the Covid-19 lockdown, through the distribution of food parcels, meal vouchers, and peer support, the effort to address food insecurity of socioeconomically disadvantaged students was being undertaken through institutional initiatives and civil society interventions, thereby, playing an enabling role to ensuring the realisation of the functioning of successful completion and attainment of qualifications by these students. During Covid-19 lockdown the discontinuation of distribution of food parcels and meals to socio-economically disadvantaged students compromised their basic or deficiency needs (physiological, safety and psychological). By limiting their freedoms to access food through the channels that were in place prior to the lockdown, their ability to translate the capability of knowledge acquisition through higher education was threatened and constrained, thereby, presenting negative conversion factors.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the factors that affect student success. Most of these are about the teaching and learning environment. Such writings appear oblivious of the fact that as human beings, the needs of students can be understood and prioritised in a manner suggested by the Maslow hierarchy of needs. At the base of the hierarchy are survival or physiological needs which include food and water, sufficient rest, clothing and shelter, overall health, and reproduction. Maslow states that these basic physiological needs must be addressed before humans move on to the next level of fulfilment. Students need food to live and long to satisfy other needs at the higher levels of the hierarchy. Food insecurity has far-reaching negative consequences on students' success.

Food insecurity is a global phenomenon, affecting mostly students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. In South Africa, food insecurity is more prevalent among students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. The Covid-19 nation-wide lockdown exacerbated the scale and effect of food insecurity among the students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. During the pandemic, institutions continued with their function of creating and imparting knowledge, which is a resource in attaining the functionings of being educated to all students. But as has been pointed out, the personal, environmental as well as sociopolitical conversion factors would be the determinants of who among the students would successfully and satisfactorily convert the capability of acquisition of knowledge into the functionings of attaining the goal of determining a degree and the promise of an improved wellbeing of life. While this piece of *Briefly Speaking* does not completely rule out the role of agency that would see other food-insecure students beat the odds, the consensus in the literature reviewed an antagonistic role that food insecurity plays in academic lives of students.

The issue of food insecurity among students from socioeconomically disadvantaged background needs to be addressed to enhance student success, and reduce student failure and drop out. It should be researched more, and it should increasingly become part of the important discourses on factors that militate against student success in South Africa.

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