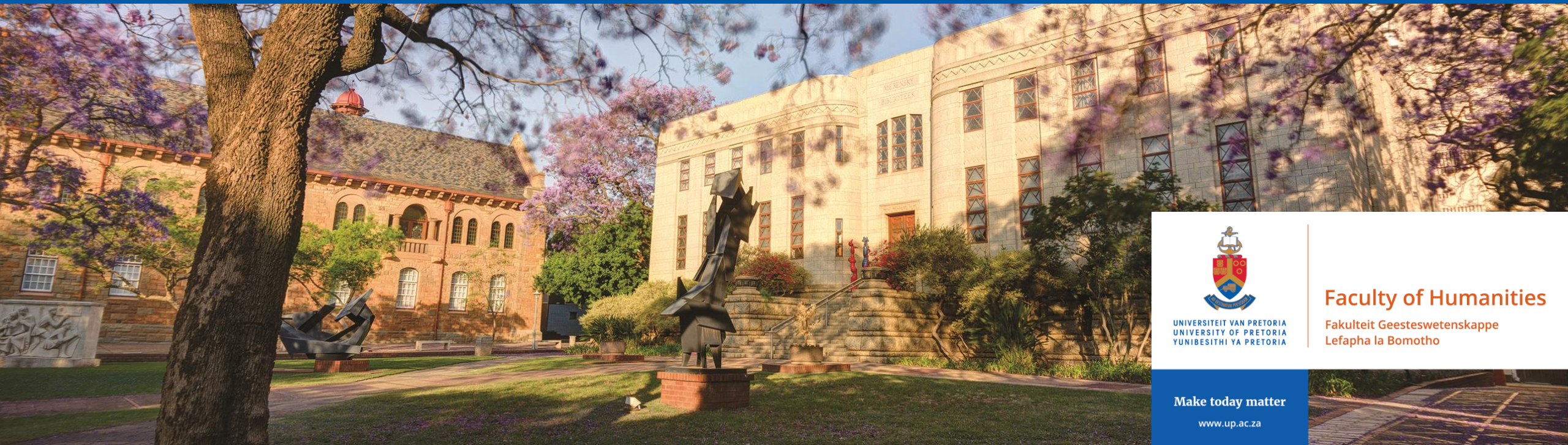


A hybrid approach to inclusive social work practice in South Africa

Presenter: Dr. Elmien Claassens

ASASWEI conference

10-12 September 2025



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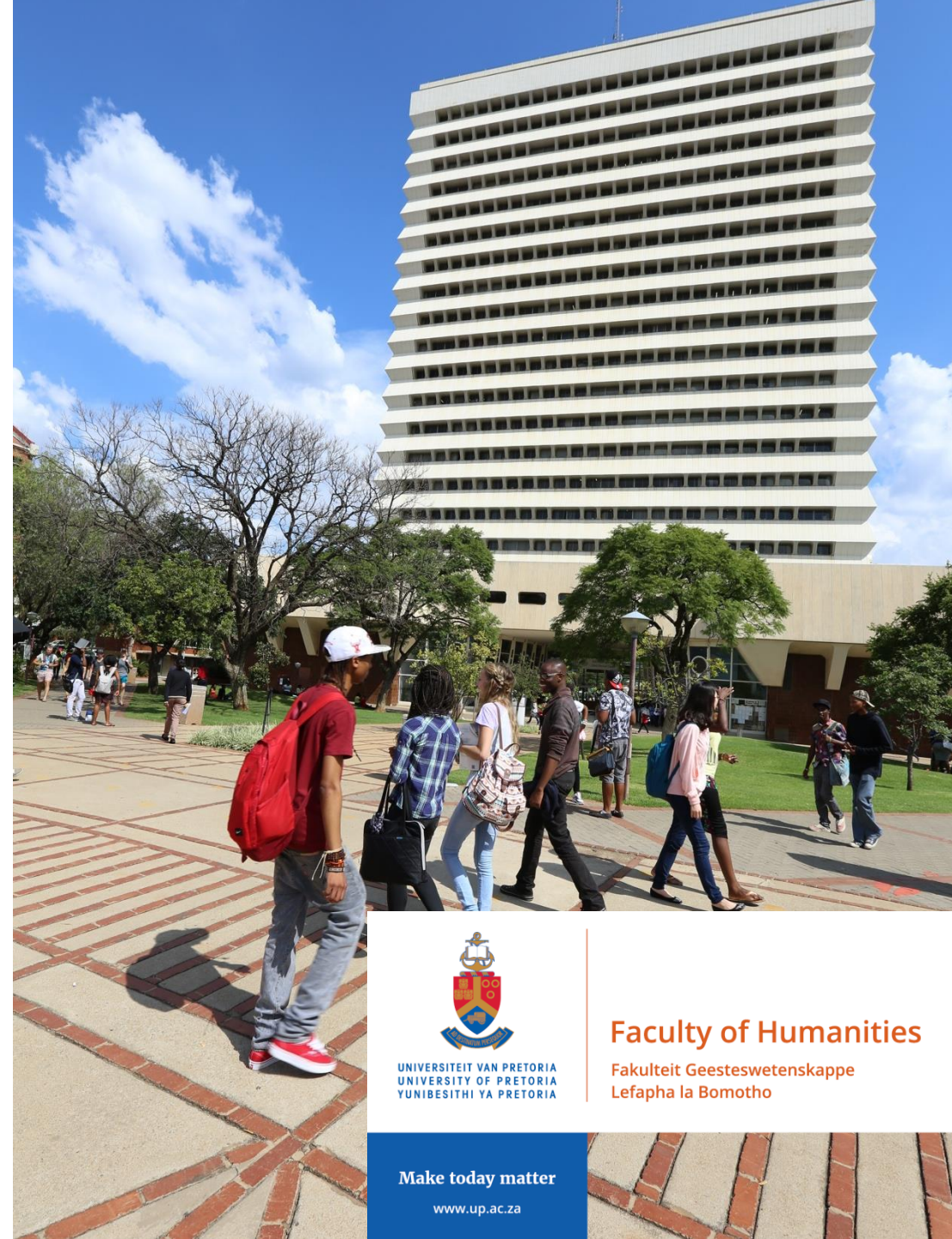
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Presentation

1. Introduction
2. Methodology
3. Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice
4. Social justice in the digital age
5. Findings of the study
6. Guidelines for a hybrid approach to inclusive social work practice
7. Practical steps to digital inclusion
8. Conclusions & recommendations



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Introduction

- It all started during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Challenges with going online and navigating the integration with technology
- Made me think of our profession and how responsive (or not) we are to the digital era.
- I embarked on a **PhD research** journey.....



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Introduction

- Findings revealed that social workers **lacked guidelines** for implementing an inclusive hybrid approach
- A **hybrid approach** => refers to social work offered both in person and by means of digital modes (Pink et al., 2022:415).
- Aligned with the developmental social work approach, underpinned by a **human rights** and **social justice** perspective



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Introduction

- Social workers must be **competent** in using technology – uphold the core values and ethical standards (Perron et.al, 2010)
- Hybrid approach = **broader reach** and **greater efficiency**
- Failure to be trained in the use of technology puts social workers at risk of practising with **obsolete knowledge**



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Introduction

- Social workers should not have to choose between technology and in-person services
- Focus should be on how the two can **complement** each other to create a more inclusive and effective practice
- A hybrid approach **empowers** social workers to confidently use technology where it fits. Allowing them to expand their reach – while maintaining the essential personal connection



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Introduction

- Based on the study, guidelines have been developed: assist social workers to adopt and confidently use technology
- Know how to effectively integrate technology with in-person services



Methodology

- A **mixed methods** research approach, with descriptive and explorative research purposes. Explore how a hybrid approach could facilitate inclusive social work practice in South Africa.
- A **cross-sectional survey design**; 127 social workers, managers and supervisors across 9 provinces in SA; purposefully sampled.
- Participants were **purposefully sampled** from Department of Social Development (DSD) [public sector] and NACOSS [private sector]
- In the **qualitative** phase the researcher collected data through semi-structured, one on one interviews with 22 social workers and managers of social workers.
- In the **quantitative** phase data was collected from 105 social workers and managers through self-administered online questionnaires.



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Methodology

- Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Fraser's theory of social justice as **theoretical frameworks**
- **TAM** = Perceived usefulness and Perceived ease of use = points to technology acceptance
- Explore how a hybrid approach could facilitate inclusive social work practice in South Africa.



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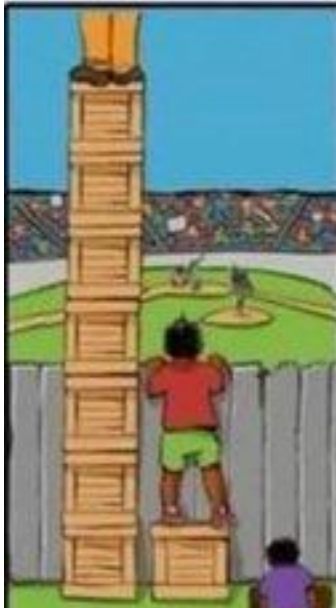




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@ClinPsychDavid

 <p>REALITY</p> <p>One gets more than is needed, while the other gets less than is needed. Thus, a huge disparity is created.</p>	 <p>EQUALITY</p> <p>The assumption is that everyone benefits from the same supports. This is considered to be equal treatment.</p>	 <p>EQUITY</p> <p>Everyone gets the support they need, which produces equity.</p>	 <p>JUSTICE</p> <p>All 3 can see the game without supports or accommodations because the cause(s) of the inequity was addressed. The systemic barrier has been removed.</p>	 <p>INCLUSION</p> <p>Everyone is INCLUDED in the game. No one is left on the outside; we <u>didn't</u> only remove the barriers keeping people out, we made sure they were valued & involved.</p>
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Fraser's theory of social justice: PARTICIPATORY PARITY

- This radical-democratic interpretation of equal moral worth, justice requires social arrangements that permit ALL to participate as peers in social life.
- Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction.
- In relation to the digital divide, applying Fraser's principle of participatory parity not only addresses access to technology but also seeks to transform the underlying social conditions that perpetuate inequality.



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Fraser's theory of social justice:

PARTICIPATORY PARITY

- Participatory parity (equal participation) as a standard (or measurement) for social justice refers to the extent to which ordinary people are able to speak and/or be heard by others.

This helps us to:

- Assess how just a society is.
- Guide us on what to do about it.

=> The extent to which some people are silenced because of the social group(s) to which they belong points to social injustice and requires our response as social work professionals.



Three-dimensional levels of Fraser's framework

Economic dimension

- **Fair** distribution of opportunities vs Maldistribution (**Ask 'what' questions**)

Cultural/legal dimension

- **Equal** recognition of difference vs Misrecognition (**Ask 'who' questions**)

Political dimension

- Level 1: **Just** representation vs Misrepresentation (**Ask 'what' questions**)
- Level 2: **Just** framing vs Misframing (**Ask 'who' questions**)
- Level 3: **Equitable** decision-making rules & processes about the **who** and the **what** of justice vs Unfair and exclusionary decision-making rules & processes about the **who** and the **what** of justice (**Ask 'how' questions**)



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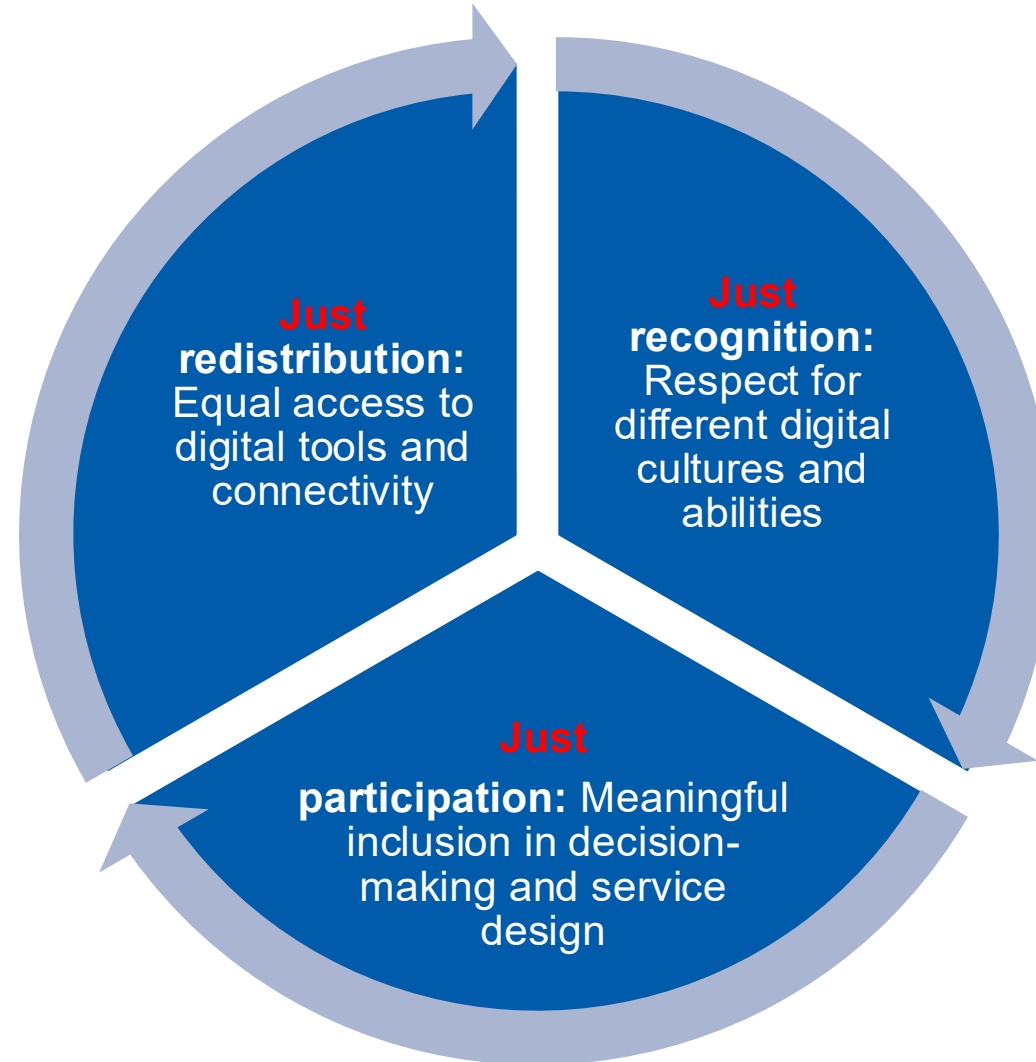
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Social justice in the digital age (Fraser, 2008)

What hinders and what enables equal participation?



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Applied to the digital era

1. Service users must have equal access to physical resources, such as devices and Internet connectivity (**just redistribution**).
2. All service users must be included without discrimination based on cultural categories (**just recognition**).
3. Finally, the political structure must ensure that all citizens have a fair chance to influence decisions that affect them, including decisions about access to technology (**just participation**).



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Findings of the study:

South African social work practice: A closer look

- Digital exclusion => described as a divide, between the information rich and information poor (Cushman and Klecun (2006) in Weiss et al., 2016:4)
- Social workers shared a concern that when technology is used in service delivery, many service users are **excluded** – unless an effort is made to include all people.
- One of the findings indicated a **material inequality** that emphasised that equal participation in social services were hindered, including economic inequalities that led to the maldistribution of services, and that led to digital exclusion of service users.



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Findings of the study:

South African social work practice: A closer look

- Different levels of social workers' proficiency with technology
- **Resistance** to the acceptance of technology
- Increased **workload** that came about with the use of technology
- **Limited availability** of devices and Internet access



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Findings of the study:

South African social work practice: A closer look

- **Ethical concerns** regarding the use of technology, and the impact thereof on the helping relationship
- Safety of the **recordkeeping process** when technology is used
- The **risks** involved in social work practice with the use of technology
- **Limitations** of what technology can and can't do in comparison to in-person services



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Findings of the study:

South African social work practice: A closer look

- The **limited access to basic technology**, like smart phones or emails, point to deeper systemic inequalities of poverty and exclusion.
- Digital exclusion does not only come from a lack of access to technology, but from **greater social inequalities** in communities.
- The majority of participants (**67.62%**) agreed that digital exclusion is a serious challenge for service users when technology is used in social work practice in South Africa.



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Findings of the study:

South African social work practice: A closer look

- Another finding pointed to the **material inequality** where economic differences between geographical areas lead to maldistribution and the digital exclusion of rural areas when it comes to social services.
- In the context of this research study, the exclusive use of technology in social services poses **a serious risk to the digital exclusion** of service users.



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Findings of the study:

South African social work practice: A closer look

- **Vulnerable groups** that do not have the digital skills to make use of devices for social contact, including people with mental disabilities and older persons, who experience challenges with the transition to service delivery with technology.



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Guidelines for a hybrid approach to inclusive social work practice

- Prerequisites for a hybrid approach to inclusive social services:
 - **Technological readiness and access**
 - **Training**
 - **Organisational policies**
 - **User-friendly technologies**
 - **Advocacy**
- **Bridging the digital divide through social justice:**
 - **Participatory parity**
 - **Resource maldistribution**
 - **Redistribution**
 - **Political justice**
 - **Promote inclusivity and equity**



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Guidelines for a hybrid approach to inclusive social work practice

- Prerequisites for a hybrid approach to inclusive social services:

Bridging the digital divide through social justice:

- **Participatory parity:** adapt our service delivery methods by offering in-person alternatives when necessary to ensure equitable participation and access to resources.
- **Resource maldistribution:** help bridge the digital divide by offering various forms of technology training to service users, thereby enhancing their digital skills and ensuring more inclusive participation in society.
- **Redistribution:** advocate for policies that promote digital inclusion, such as government-supported initiatives aimed at providing affordable digital infrastructure to communities.



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Guidelines for a hybrid approach to inclusive social work practice

- Prerequisites for a hybrid approach to inclusive social services:

Bridging the digital divide through social justice:

- **Political justice:** Fraser's 3rd level of political justice emphasises the importance of equitable decision-making and regulatory frameworks. One way to bridge the digital divide in social work is to align technology use and policies to meet the specific needs of service users, especially vulnerable groups like children, older persons, and people living with disabilities.



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Guidelines for a hybrid approach to inclusive social work practice

- Prerequisites for a hybrid approach to inclusive social services:

Bridging the digital divide through social justice:

- **Promote inclusivity and equity:** The unaffordability of technology and inadequate infrastructure in SA present significant barriers to equitable service delivery in social work. These challenges force social workers to adapt their practices, often opting for in-person services to ensure that all service users receive the support they need. This situation underscores the urgent need for increased investment in technology infrastructure and resources within social service organisations to promote inclusivity and equity.



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Practical steps to digital inclusion

- Social workers should **advocate for policies and legislations** that promotes digital inclusion, like government supported, and private initiatives that are aimed at providing affordable digital infrastructure.
- **Understand** existing frameworks, both local and international, to utilise it to address the digital divide and continue to advance digital inclusion of all people.
- Social workers play a critical role as **champions for digital inclusion** – promoting it through all avenues e.g. partnerships, collaborations outside of social work.
- Social workers can bridge the divide by **empowering service users** with digital skills and literacy, in order for them to overcome digital exclusion themselves and be able to live in the digital era.



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Conclusions and recommendations

- Recommendation = A similar study should be conducted at a national level to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the service users' experience with a hybrid approach.
- Continuous professional development of both social work students and social workers in practice
- As a profession, we have to ensure that we are around the table of discussions around technology, AI and the future of the digital era



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“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Martin Luther King Jr.,
Letter from the Birmingham Jail”



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AS LONG AS POVERTY,
INJUSTICE AND GROSS
INEQUALITY PERSIST
IN OUR WORLD, NONE
OF US CAN TRULY REST.



NELSON MANDELA

THANK YOU



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