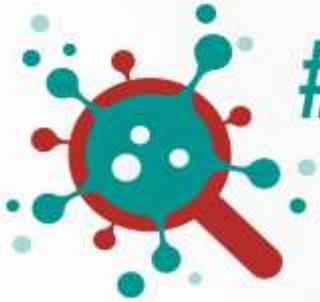


RESEARCHERS BOOTCAMP



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READY, SET, THINK!

Education Researchers Respond to The COVID-19 Pandemic

Theme 8:

Governance and Management-
Higher Education Response to COVID-19

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JET EDUCATION
SERVICES

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Acronyms

DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
USAf	Universities South Africa



Introduction

As the coronavirus continues to spread, many schools and universities have responded by cancelling in-person classes and moving to emergency remote teaching. Higher education institutions have also had to address challenges related to international operations including study abroad programmes, research and conference travel. With traditional lectures being cancelled and students not being able to travel or being subject to more rigid health requirements, academic institutions have implemented systems to accommodate everyone who will be affected. The discussions and thoughts in this document are based largely on an analysis of the risks and impact of COVID-19 on higher education and on what can be done whilst we “ride the wave of disruption”. In times of crisis, we must have the big picture in mind and maintain a seamless coordination that will enable institutions, including universities, to respond quickly and achieve shared goals. As much as we prepare for the worst, we must try our best to turn a crisis into an opportunity too, and this will mean new ways of thinking for a new future. The global and national lockdown of institutions is going to cause major (and likely unequal) interruptions in students’ learning. Given the evidence of the importance of assessments for learning, should universities consider postponing rather than doing away with examinations completely? Is the extension of the academic year going to help or hurt?

This crisis represents an unprecedented occasion for higher education to evaluate its preparedness for new changes. It has also galvanised us into reflection and action, for instance, regarding how we can tap into digital technologies and other creative ways of better serving the needs of higher education and addressing latent disruptors like COVID-19.

The objective of this research project is to allow praxis to inform policy by outlining the courses of action that institutions are implementing in South Africa. While it is understood that the reality of each institution is unique, it is hoped that this project will highlight issues of governance and management during these times as we all continue to learn while the COVID-19 situation unfolds.

Questions for the study

1. What is the higher education sector doing to manage the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown?
How have things changed?
2. How are institutions addressing the probable risks and impact of COVID-19 in the following areas:
 - a. Human resources.
 - b. Finance.
 - c. Student support:
 - i. Housing/food.
 - ii. Financial aid/student loans.
 - iii. Digital/remote learning.



Methodology

This research took place under exceptional circumstances, where face-to-face interviews and focus groups were impossible but where websites could be used to gather information and data for debate and discussion. The researchers adjusted to these new circumstances by flexibly and creatively investigating and categorising the varying responses by higher education institutions to the pandemic and the lockdown, in the process also drawing upon their own ideas and individual experiences.

The research team consisted of 11 participants from a range of South African higher education institutions; they consisted mostly of young researchers and were accompanied by a team lead, a co-researcher and a reviewer (Appendix A).

Team meetings were held during the month of April using Google Hangouts as well as WhatsApp. There were also one to one discussions between the team lead and individual participants. The initial meeting set the scene for the work and divided the areas of interest among the participants. Each researcher was given a timeframe within which they were to complete the task given to them and submit their work on the Google platform created by JET.

Findings

It is essential at this point for institutions to work collaboratively towards national strategies in conjunction with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Universities South Africa (USAf) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in order to: develop policies and delivery modes to support the academic project; obtain national consensus on data and digital provision; ensure flexibility for repayment of student fees; ensure entry of graduates into the labour market, thereby avoiding longer unemployment periods; and uphold the credibility and legitimacy of (future) qualifications.

The Bootcamp, which was initiated by JET Education Services, identified several key focus areas:

1. Leadership responses and approaches to managing the COVID-19 crisis.
2. Student support – academically, financially and in terms of wellness.
3. Research.
4. Human resources.

Institutional leadership during lockdown

Rapid response and interventions

The COVID-19 outbreak has seized the attention of leaders and emergency management teams at universities across the country. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the ways in which universities function, having a cascading influence on leadership responsibilities and obligations across faculties/departments and requiring leaders' immediate responses (Gigliotti, 2020).

Although the long-term impact of the pandemic on universities is unknown, the short-term impact is significant, including the cancellation of face-to-face classes and university events, dramatic shifts to



emergency remote teaching and restrictions on student and staff travel. In the flurry of activity, questions are rightfully being raised about digital inequality and the effect on students who lack access to the technology required, the challenges facing students who are homeless or food insecure and the financial impact on hourly workers across institutions (Gigliotti, 2020). The timing of the crisis has disrupted what would otherwise be an enlivening and energising time on campuses, when institutions would have been conducting end of year programmes like graduations and preparing commencement activities for the next teaching phase. Academic staff have voiced concerns about the implications of remote teaching and how the plight of the vulnerable has not been taken fully into consideration by the higher education sector. Institutions like the University of the Free State and the University of Pretoria have opted to start their remote teaching in May, whilst others like the Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand have already commenced with it. It is important that, during such crisis situations, staff and students should not feel as though they have been thrown into the deep end, without direction; creative, consultative and well-executed decisions need to be made with regard to staff and students' livelihoods and futures.

A group of concerned academic staff, mainly from various universities, have argued as follows in the document, Public Universities with a Public Conscience:

Our contextual analysis shows that the current unilateral implementation of online teaching and learning by education institutions will result in an academic disaster and will exacerbate the COVID-19 humanitarian disaster. Neither teaching staff nor students possess the means to make this shift right now. "Going online" immediately will simply widen existing inequalities and make meaningful learning impossible for the vast majority of students.

We, the concerned academic staff propose a Social Pedagogy approach, which is consultative, inclusive, and sensitive to the contexts of students, teachers and their communities. It works toward a mutually supportive framework that will carry our pedagogic work through the current crisis, into a period of just recovery, and a more equitable future. We are guided by the following key principles:

- *Inclusivity and participation*
- *Equity and equality*
- *Transformation and decolonisation*
- *Academic development and progress with integrity.* (Concerned Academic Staff, 2020)

On this basis, these concerned academics called for an "immediate cessation of formal online curriculum roll-out". Yet it appears that the horse has already bolted, because many institutions have already started remote teaching. At the same time, institutions acknowledge that some students do not have access to the digital services being made available. Recognising this, it remains important for a comprehensive and ongoing discussion to take place among all higher education all stakeholders, to ensure that all students, without exception, continue to be able to study, and that all staff are provided with the means and capacity to continue to carry out their functions.



Student support and the challenges

Online delivery methods

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing schools, universities and learning and development professionals to shift rapidly from face-to-face learning to remote teaching and learning. With the lockdown having been extended beyond the original period, Professor Jonathan Jansen believes that the academic year is now lost (Jansen, 2020). However, the Departments of Basic Education (DBE) and of Higher Education and Training are developing a rollout plan for schools and universities to restart teaching, and Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande has stated that the 2020 academic year should continue. The higher education sector has fully endorsed the Minister's comment. For example, according to its 8 April Amendments to the 2020 Academic Calendar, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) has stated that the first semester of this academic year will be completed through remote learning, which will start on the 20th April (UJ, 2020). Other institutions, however, may not be fully prepared to offer online learning, and a recent meeting, the USAf Board of Directors felt that the majority of students are not ready to switch completely to online learning (USAf, 2020). Some USAf members reported a 90% readiness to deliver classes online, and even declared that they are prepared to resume classes online from as early as 1 April; but others urged serious introspection over how the sector might ensure that all of its students are able to study, virtually (USAf, 2020).

Online learning presents various challenges to higher learning institutions in South Africa. Many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds do not have access to the internet due to lack of network coverage, or cannot afford access, even though universities have made data available. There is also a recognition that some students live in circumstances totally un conducive to learning, such as overcrowded homes with insufficient or unsuitable amenities (USAf, 2020). In addition, there may be a need to build the capacity of academics so that they are sufficiently prepared to offer virtual teaching. The University of Venda has recently announced that it is migrating from Blackboard to Moodle, in line with some other South African universities. In an email communication (6 April 2020) to Univen staff, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic Professor Crafford said that the Blackboard system is extremely expensive, with a license fee of R4 million per year. Another challenge with regard to online learning is that many universities do not have policies in place to allow for assessment of this new mode of learning and teaching.

Support for and assessment of practical modules

E-learning is already a solution for many theoretical modules, with a simple statement of: "We will put it online". Even in practically oriented fields, online learning is possible, seeing that technique demonstrations are made in introductory modules at tertiary education institutions. Some modules, especially those conducted at exit level, however, require students to demonstrate that previously taught techniques have been mastered (De Witt, 2020).

Tertiary education institutions provide controlled environments for students to learn these techniques and master them under the supervision of trained personnel. This practical learning cannot simply be bridged digitally. For instance, can the teaching practice component of education students be conducted and assessed online? Can such students really learn how to handle a class with only virtual training? Can agricultural and veterinary students acquire the necessary skills to conduct complex protocols in the



industry if they have only received online instruction? And could a student qualify for a job when virtual/online training is not the only aspect required?

Student financial support

Since, due to the lockdown, many students are unable to access finances and many of their parents are unemployed, students may not be able to pay their fees by the end of the year. A more flexible method of paying fees may need to be considered. It is also important to reflect on the implications of the fact that some disadvantaged students, due to their limited finances or lack of access to technology, may be left further behind merely because the inequality gap is widening; and it is also important to ensure that vulnerable students who may not pass year 2020 due to no fault of their own should be allowed to return without being penalised.

Student psycho-social well-being

As the pandemic grows around the world, students' day-to-day lives are being increasingly disrupted. From courses being moved from face-to-face teaching modes to remote online classes (which makes students anxious because they are unused to these new forms of digital learning), to not being able to socialise with friends and family, or have access to resources such as the library or student residences, students' lives are being affected in many ways. Some students can cope due to the privileged environment they find themselves in, while poor, disadvantaged, marginalised and vulnerable students have to deal with a much deeper level of psycho-social factors.

It is important to remember that it is normal to be emotionally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, given that it is new and unknown. Even more unusual are the efforts to combat it – such as locking down entire cities, provinces and countries – which makes the situation even more challenging, with each person reacting differently.

Students in South Africa already have to cope with very deprived living conditions, often as part of large families in rural areas and townships, which are not conducive to learning.

Students studying abroad

StudyPortals, in association with the British Council, has done studies of the impact of the pandemic on international students, students' change of plans and expectations of university responses. Key insights from surveys thus far include:

- Students planning to start their studies in the short-term are more concerned about COVID-19 disruptions to their study plans;
- Prospective students are worried about travel restrictions and financial issues (e.g. a decrease in their study budget or the increasing cost of studying abroad);
- Students expect universities to improve hygiene measures on campus, as well as offer a 24/7 helpline, online counselling and support, and extend their application periods;
- Students currently in their home countries are concerned about travel restrictions, study budgets and the challenge of completing their current studies; and



- Students already studying abroad are more pessimistic in their expectations of how COVID-19 will impact their future study plans, and are more likely to consider online learning, or postponing their studies (Guterrer, 2020).

Research

For some students, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on their research. Postgraduate students have been particularly impacted during this crisis because of their need to submit research work or dissertations. The combination of financial uncertainty, pressure to graduate within a given time-frame and before funding runs out, managing research and teaching responsibilities (if a student is a tutor), disruption of academic work, and lost conference presentation opportunities underscores the importance of prioritising mental health and well-being. There have to be realistic expectations for work and progress during a global pandemic.

Questions that university researchers require answers to include: how to apply for new funding; how to continue with and manage research remotely; the likely impact of the pandemic on current and future funding; and implications for staff who are on short-term contracts.

Many universities have put measures in place but these may not be sufficient if the technology and support is not available. According to Professor Harrison, Deputy Vice Chancellor Research at the University of Cape Town (UCT), “[e]nsuring the financial stability of our research enterprise is a top priority. I have established a research task team to identify potential routes to support both soft-funded and GOB [general operating budget] research during this difficult time. We recognise the differing challenges for these teams. She added that, in order to help researchers, the National Research Foundation has extended submissions deadlines (Harrison, 2020).

Human resources

Remote work may be more common than it used to be, but it still comes with its challenges. Not all staff find it conducive to work from home even though worldwide this is a preferred way of working. Staff have difficulty in managing time to work and managing the home and children under a lockdown situation.

Communication feels somewhat fragmented, and there is a sense of isolation due to not having “in-office” traffic or common lunch breaks and only a limited amount of personal contact.

Office technology is usually quick and efficient. But remote internet connections or signals may not be as reliable, and that can be a problem. There are no “on-call” technicians, and one has to deal with this remotely, which takes time.

Generally, no matter what the challenges, research indicates that remote workers are more productive (although they may not be happier) than their in-office counterparts. According to one study, remote employees work 1.4 more days per month than their office-based counterparts, resulting in more than three additional weeks of work per year (Caramela, 2020). However, researchers also found that working from home can be more stressful than working at the office: approximately 29% of telecommuting respondents said they had a hard time maintaining a healthy work-life balance, whereas 23% of office workers reported the same struggle (Caramela, 2020).



Solutions/recommendations

Recommendations for online and practical work

Faculties should ensure that students have access to:

1. Information that sets out the respective responsibilities of the faculty and the university for the delivery of the programme, module, or element of study and a clear schedule for the delivery of study materials and for assessment of their work.
2. Module descriptors, to show the intended learning outcomes and teaching, learning and assessment methods of the modules.

Students should have access to:

1. A schedule of any student support available, including timetabled activities, for example, tutorial sessions or web-based conferences.
2. Clear and up-to-date information about the learning support available to them locally and remotely for their programme or element of study.
3. Documents that set out their own responsibilities as learners, as well as university and faculty responsibilities regarding the support of a programme or element of study.

Possible solutions for the practical challenges of the agricultural and veterinary curricula include:

1. Declare agricultural training to be part of the outcomes based education system, so that clinical practice or practical training, which students complete in their own time, is compulsory (ASSAf, 2017). This will address problems faced during the lockdown period, and also beyond.
2. Students have to learn that if they can do practical training at tertiary institutions, they can also do it at other organisations as well as in industry itself.
3. Students can be placed at different institutions for a long period of time (e.g. a year at a specific institution, such as is expected of final year Bachelor of Technology (BTech) students) (ASSAf, 2017).
4. Students can be placed at various institutions for shorter periods of time (e.g. a week or a month).
5. The services of renowned organisations in the industry can be utilised. Many organisations already conduct training at their facilities, and tertiary education institutions can capitalise on this to teach the same basic principles, albeit through different institutions (De Witt, 2020).
6. Holidays and/or a community year can also become part of agricultural students' time to obtain their practical experience. During the community year, government can possibly aid in paying a part of the student's salary. There are multiple agricultural schools, agricultural colleges, government farms and penitentiaries in South Africa that tertiary education institutions can approach to assist in the practical training of their students (De Witt, 2020).
7. The classroom and curriculum composition will have to change to incorporate more "real life" situations (De Witt, 2020).



8. Video material (whether pre-recorded or live streamed) from specific farmers, consultants and processing facilities can be used to teach students.
9. “Body cameras” worn by veterinarians, consultants, farmers or feed mill operators during certain scenarios, together with “fixed cameras” in milk stalls, hatcheries and food processing plants can be used to demonstrate certain principles to students (Hagler et al, 2018). Possible questions can then be structured based on these scenarios to determine how students would handle specific problems or how they would have behaved differently (Ricciuti, 2018).
10. “Body cameras” can also become part of the tools used at tertiary education institutions where students can showcase that they have acquired the necessary skills to conduct certain tasks. The graphical content can be reviewed for evaluation (Hagler et al, 2018) and can later constitute proof that they have indeed conducted certain tasks (Ricciuti, 2018).
11. Fewer students per session, however, means that lecturers have to repeat the content multiple times. With big classes and few lecturers this becomes impossible to maintain over the long term (De Witt, 2020).
12. Too many practical sessions in the same venue defeats the purpose of social distancing and lockdown, given the contagiousness of the virus.

Solutions for financial aid

1. Emergency travel support or funding should be made available for students in need, particularly non-funded financially constrained students.
2. Additional funding should be made available for students who might need to incur additional expenses by being outside of the university residences where they would have received food and accommodation.
3. National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding requirements need to take into account a possible extension of the academic year and the need to support students for additional months, perhaps into the first quarter of 2021 (DHET, 2020).
4. Funding requirements for institutions in distress need to be explored, since universities may lose tuition fee and accommodation income if a lockdown or semi-lockdown is extended. The high initial costs of online learning must also be considered.

DHET response as at 21 April 2020

- NSFAS allowances continue to be paid during the lockdown period. Many institutions paid students before the lockdown to ensure that they had the necessary funds before leaving campus.
- A learning materials allowance was paid to all university students by universities early in the academic year once funding and registration was confirmed. Upfront payments from NSFAS to institutions enabled these allowance payments to be made.



- There has been no change to NSFAS funding for qualifying students at this stage. Given the likely extension of the academic year, as mentioned, modelling is being done to determine the costs of the different scenarios.
- According to the latest report received by the Minister of Higher Education from NSFAS, a total of 5 516 first-time entering student appeals against NSFAS funding decisions have been approved, and a further 1 404 student appeals were unsuccessful. A total number of 24 571 continuing students' appeals have been received from institutions, of which 14 117 have been approved (NSFAS, 2020). This important information indicates the manner in which government is responding during this pandemic.
- NSFAS has established a virtual contact centre using web platforms and social media and has continued to engage with students (DHET, 2020).

Student wellness

1. Most universities have put in place offices, and staff trained in psycho-social issues, for students to access during the lockdown. Websites for most universities indicate the processes that should be followed and how students can contact staff for assistance.
2. Some (approximately 6 200) students have remained in university accommodation during the lockdown. These students could not go home because they were either international students or lived in other provinces and had very limited time to travel. Residence fees are usually paid in advance and thus it is incumbent upon institutions to provide all necessary support for students during the lockdown, albeit with limited staff on duty.

Students with special needs and learning disabilities

1. Students living with disabilities require additional dedicated funding and support arrangements in order to allow them to procure appropriate materials to work remotely.
2. Government needs to address parents' and students' uncertainties in this regard.
3. University teaching and learning policies and practices must include guidelines on assessment and progression of students living with disabilities, and training for lecturers in designing online materials and assessments for such students.
4. Government's proposed amendments to the Copyright Act must address the delays and costs which for decades have prevented students and others with disabilities from accessing and utilising learning materials and technologies, and thereby align the country with the Marrakesh Treaty of 2013 intended to facilitate access to published works for persons who are blind, visually impaired or print disabled (Nicholson, 2019).

International students

1. It is important for institutions to keep communication channels open and consistent so that students can continue their studies once the crisis has abated.



2. To aid them through these uncertain times, prospective international students are seeking further information in the following areas:
 - a. Funding and scholarships
 - b. Choosing a study destination
 - c. How to prepare for admissions exams
 - d. Application and essay writing
 - e. Researching which programme to study
 - f. Alternative forms of study
3. Institutions must endeavour to use formats for information sharing in the following ways online
 - a. Online newsletters
 - b. Dedicated sections on university websites
 - c. Online forums and discussion groups
 - d. Videos
 - e. Instant messaging and chat bots
 - f. Blogs
 - g. Podcasts
4. Online communication channels are widely used and are therefore a better way to communicate, compared to printed materials.
5. International students' concerns with regard to application and enrolment intricacies, and visa issuance and renewal problems, can be assuaged by providing them with advice and assistance in relation to current regulations.

Research

Researchers are now working remotely. Whilst universities have some support mechanisms in place, some research projects will be significantly impacted due to the scale and reach of the COVID-19 crisis, which is likely to extend far beyond the immediate lockdown period. Where possible, permission to defer deliverables should be secured at project or funder level.

There should be guidance about research integrity and how to move research online, taking into account data management, safety considerations, ethical approval and data protection registration.

Human resources

The recruitment of new staff can continue, provided careful consideration is given to the extent to which the project, department or faculty work can be undertaken remotely.

It is important for human resource departments to allow staff to voice their opinions in order to establish systems and protocols that will be manageable by all staff concerned during the lockdown. Guidelines should be circulated to all heads of departments so that there is consistency with regards to leave (including sick leave), recruitment, benefits and compensation.

For example, staff could be grouped and allocated a time frame or certain hours in a day (unlike in an ordinary full 8 hour work situation) whereby they can work in shifts and/or by teleconferencing, and



thereby remain motivated and experience less strain. Consideration (and support and training, where appropriate) must be given to staff whose home or remote environments are not conducive to carry out their normal duties effectively. Annual, sick and emergency leave could also be utilised, creatively but fairly, to ensure staff continue to be paid (Morton and Blair, 2020).

Conclusion

As we wrestle with the uncertainties, fears and anxieties of this situation, a few guiding principles can help us in finding a balance, being productive and moving forward:

This fast-moving situation requires a careful, consultative and coordinated response from executive management teams, and ongoing, frequent, and concise communication in response to these changing conditions will be critical.

Daily communications to the university community are of utmost importance during this crisis. Members of the executive team are engaged in daily dialogue with health officials and other government departments, allowing them to think proactively and make informed decisions.

Taking into consideration the argument highlighted earlier by the concerned group of academics (Concerned Academic Staff, 2020), there is a need more than ever before for university staff and students to support one another and fight this virus together. Despite the fact that some universities have commenced with remote teaching, a clear, inclusive and participatory strategy must be adopted for university management to engage staff and seek solutions together. Finally, there are staff, both academic and administrative, who have experience with online learning or working with students with social or emotional problems, and this is an opportunity to support and learn from them and from one another. Institutions must make resources available to help these staff to support the altered and evolving academic project. Above all, in order to get through these difficult circumstances, all of us need to be collegial and collaborative.



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Appendix A

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