

FUTURE-PROOFING IMPERATIVES FOR REMOTE ONLINE TEACHING, LEARNING AND STUDENT SUPPORT IN THE CONTEXT OF PANDEMIC CHANGE AND BEYOND: A CASE FOR SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

South Africa's Plan for Higher Education identified equity and redress as key objectives guiding institutional transformation. This encompasses granting individuals fair opportunities to enter higher education and succeed therein. The COVID-19 pandemic which abruptly disrupted the 2020 academic year highlighted several challenges which have implications for student success. Academic continuity in the form of online learning was pursued by most higher education institutions. However, the remoteness of rural communities, which typifies the home environments for many South African students, threatened to exclude such students from online learning activities. The lack of access to digital devices as well as reliable internet connectivity in many of these communities impacted students' ability to engage in online learning as well as access campus-based support services. The imposed lockdown therefore caused heightened anxiety and feelings of isolation from academic activities amongst the South African student population. Since access to on-campus support systems was no longer possible, student wellness and ongoing academic engagement was potentially compromised. Increasingly, the mental health cost of remote learning was becoming apparent, with higher education institutions compelled to rethink how student support services are delivered. In the absence of face-to-face support services during the hard lock-down period, the emergent need was to identify new ways of reaching out to displaced students who may be experiencing both academic and personal distress under conditions of daunting technological changes and virtual forms of engagement, social isolation, socio-economic disadvantage and psycho-social stressors. While blended learning and hybrid forms of holistic student support were accelerated by the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the blended approach has become an indelible reality of Higher Education that is here to stay. As such, reflections on how student support services at universities in South Africa have adapted and

need to continuously evolve in the face of an uncertain world, is both timely and necessary if the goal of promoting equal access and success in Higher Education – for all - is to be fully realized.

Keywords: Student counselling and support, online learning, higher education, COVID-19, student mental health

BACKGROUND

The South African higher education sector has, since the dawn of the country's democracy, been flagged as one of the key driving forces with inherent potential to support the State's transformation agenda (Naidoo 2016). However, efforts aimed at transformation and promoting equality in the country have not been without challenges. During apartheid, institutions of higher learning were segregated according to race. Today, more than 25 years since the end of that era, there is still a notable difference between historically disadvantaged (Black) universities and historically advantaged (White) institutions, particularly in terms of infrastructure and resourcing, which are rooted in their historical legacies of inequality (Ilorah 2006).

The National Plan for Higher Education (DoE 2001) identifies equity and redress as key objectives guiding institutional transformation in South Africa, with the Education White Paper 3 (DoE 1997) describing equity and redress in terms of granting individuals:

“... fair opportunities to both enter higher education program and to succeed in them. Applying the principle of equity implies, on the one hand, a critical identification of existing inequalities which are the product of policies and structures based on race, gender, disability and other forms of discrimination or disadvantage, and on the other hand a program of transformation with a view to redress. Such transformation involves not only abolishing all existing forms of unjust differentiation, but also measures of empowerment, including financial support to bring about equal opportunity for individuals.” (par. 1.18, 7–8).

Seemingly, universities in South Africa have been making some transformation gains, at least in terms of addressing more equitable racial representation within the student body. Over the past decade, there has been a marked increase in the number of Black students entering universities across the country. Many of these students come from poor, rural areas and are reliant on government funding. However, while racial equity is an indispensable form of transformation, it cannot be viewed in isolation from other systems within institutions of higher learning, including curricula, teaching and learning, and student support (Universities South Africa 2015). Experience has shown that transformation cannot simply be a number-counting exercise, but should be supported by curriculum and structural change processes to achieve its overarching ideals (Ramrathan 2016). As such, inequalities in academic engagement and success, largely a result of students' varying socio-economic backgrounds,

persist due to the lack of focus on these other systems.

Enter COVID-19. While an increasingly diverse student population from different socio-economic backgrounds may be deemed indicative of transformation in South African tertiary institutions in democratic South Africa, it brings other dynamics that impact on the type of support students need when entering the tertiary environment. The global COVID-19 pandemic, however, highlighted a new set of transformation challenges, primarily in relation to preparedness for remote online teaching and learning and student support services when operating in a virtual environment. Virtual education has direct implications for student engagement and success in the academic project, and ultimately for student retention, wellness and throughput. This article aims to highlight the need to critically reflect on the nature and delivery of student support services in the South African Higher Education context, particularly as many institutions forge ahead with continued plans to increase and intensify online service delivery in more accessible and advanced ways beyond COVID-19.

COVID-19: AN UNEXPECTED DISRUPTOR

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the world by storm in the first quarter of 2020, resulting in drastic measures being imposed to restrict the movement of people within and between countries in an effort to curb the spread of this novel, infectious disease. The resultant lockdown and social distancing interventions imposed in South Africa late March 2020, has had a significant impact on all sectors of South African society, including Higher Education. As a result, higher education systems, policies and practices are being significantly shifted as the sector faces an ongoing, unprecedented challenge to its structural and operational status quo. Traditional face-to-face or contact teaching and learning platforms, which up to this point formed the basis of tertiary education, had to be abruptly suspended in the wake of the imposed national lockdown. Institutions have had to grapple with multiple demands to ensure staff and student safety, while simultaneously devising rapid response plans to ensure academic continuity and recovery under very uncertain conditions (The World Bank Group 2020). Central to institutional contingency discussions has been the issue of revising, adapting and reconfiguring methods of teaching and learning that could support continuity of the academic programme in light of imposed restrictions to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the need to develop future-proof measures and processes for academic program delivery in the context of unanticipated and at times novel, disruptions to campus-based activities, has become increasingly necessary. Alongside this, however, is the need to reconsider how student support services are offered and to reflect on flexible, novel, relevant and responsive initiatives which need to be factored into online and blended approaches to student support services in South African Higher Education.

The use of technology and “blended approaches” to teaching and learning, which have been increasingly introduced and promoted in recent years (Tshabalala, Ndeya-Ndereya, and Van der Merwe 2014), have become more relevant and central to academic discussions and institutional planning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Masie (2006, cited in Oliver 2018, 22) defines blended learning as “the use of two or more styles of content or context delivery or discovery”. The concept of a “blended” approach is synonymous with teaching and learning via distance education offered by institutions such as the University of South Africa (UNISA), but still somewhat underdeveloped within contact institutions. Allan (2007) highlights a range of benefits derived from blended learning programs; these include increased accessibility to learning content and engagement; provision of more flexible and efficient learning opportunities and experiences, and optimal use of ICT facilities. However, there seems to be less focus on the impact of adjusting to this “new normal”, particularly on the part of students.

First year entrants in the 2020 academic year had little time to adjust to the transition between high school and university before lockdown was imposed. So, while many universities sought to respond to the abrupt shutdown by swiftly moving towards implementing blended or online learning, there was a disjuncture between institutional, staff and student readiness levels for this transition. Initially it seemed that not enough was being done to address these gaps, particularly for students in remote areas, with limited access to power or network connectivity, to be able to engage in the online teaching and learning project. Data and laptop roll outs to some students were planned, but in some cases, significantly delayed. In general, online accessibility for both students and academics working remotely was quickly identified as a limitation. Furthermore, there were elements of resistance, not surprisingly, from both staff and student leadership given the realities of the social, economic and technical divide prevalent in South Africa, amidst the imperative to leave no student behind. Nonetheless, in the face of pressured demands to account for teaching and learning continuity during COVID-19, academic departments at various universities were compelled to redesign course delivery and reconsider learning outcomes for the 2020 academic year.

STUDENT-CENTRED TEACHING AND LEARNING

While efforts at ensuring academic continuity were imperative, many South African students faced significant hurdles to accessing online education. This because the persistent legacy of inequality continues to have an adverse impact on historically disadvantaged students in terms of limiting their access to educational technologies embedded in online teaching and learning practices; this challenge is compounded when students are expected to engage in virtual academic platforms outside of the traditional face-to-face classrooms. This change not only

posed potential technological challenges for these students, many of whom lack access to even basic resources such as electricity, computers, or smartphones to facilitate remote online learning, but also has potentially disruptive psychological and emotional implications for an already vulnerable group. The remoteness of rural communities, where many of these poor students live, also impacts on Wi-Fi connectivity, rendering it either non-existent or unstable and as such, further compromises their engagement in any online learning project.

Student-centred teaching, a necessary imperative in the face of educational transformation, involves a shift away from the traditional teacher-centred approach where the focus has historically been on what the teacher does to impart knowledge. Student-centred learning has often been associated with the use of technology in teaching and learning (Plush and Kehrwald 2014), with less focus on student support for student wellness and student success. However, in a student-centred environment, the focus is on *what the student does or needs*, which is deemed more important in determining what is learned as compared to what the teacher does (UNSW 2016). However, in terms of teaching and learning preferences at South African institutions of higher learning, student needs and preferences differ vastly. This is due, in part, to the diverse socioeconomic statuses of students and their exposure or access to required technology. Adapting teaching and learning practices in the wake of COVID-19 necessitated a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how higher education should be perceived, delivered and made accessible to students. Could the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic be an opportunity for institutions to transform beyond race towards a more inclusive, authentic student-centred teaching and learning process that is cognizant of the totality of student experiences and realities, including the wellness dimension?

While tertiary study has traditionally been associated with face-to-face lectures and in some cases augmented by online academic teaching and support resources, the global COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the way in which “access”, “contact” and “interaction” embedded within traditional teaching and learning practices, is now articulated and enacted. Social distancing imperatives, coupled with national and global lockdown regulations has led to a shutdown of higher education institutions in the traditional sense, necessitating a shift towards more “virtual” alternatives which can provide both continuity and accessibility of services to students. The move towards virtual classrooms could be viewed as pragmatic, existential or a psychological attempt to “continue business as usual”, or regain a sense of control as a means of retaining purpose. Such shifts necessitate adequate information technology resources and ICT training for both staff and students on how to negotiate the virtual transition. During COVID-19, traditional lecture rooms have been replaced by “virtual” learning spaces which, in essence, are the daily living spaces inhabited by students in their

respective homes and communities.

Virtual learning presupposes access to optimum spaces in which teaching and learning can effectively occur. The expansion of access to previously disadvantaged students within the South African higher education system resulted in a diversification of student demographics and profiles. However, the home environments of the majority of these students, deviate significantly from what would constitute optimum teaching and learning spaces. Students' domestic environments tend to be characterized by poverty and underdevelopment, poor access to basic resources such as water, sanitation, basic healthcare electricity; crime and noise pollution abound; with the burden of domestic duties and family responsibilities weighing heavily on the shoulders of students, resulting in preoccupation with domestic-related issues, and conscious or subconscious stress around the neglect of the academic project.

THE MENTAL HEALTH COST: IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT COUNSELLING AND SUPPORT

The link between student mental health, adjustment to university and academic success, is well documented (e.g., Alonso et al. 2018; Bantjes et al. 2019; 2020; Eisenberg, Golberstein, and Hunt 2009; Mckenzie et al. 2015; Thuryrajah, Ahmed and Jeyakumar 2017). Student Counselling Services in higher education are tasked with promoting holistic student development and well-being, which in turn, supports student academic success and advances the academic retention and throughput objectives of higher education (Naidoo and Cartwright 2018). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was anticipated that changes in the higher education institutional landscape and teaching and learning practices in particular, would pose unique academic, cognitive, psychological and social adjustment challenges and pressures for students which would necessitate specialized mental health and psycho-social support from institutional structures such as Student Counselling Services. In addition, the continued persistence of the pandemic and the uncertainty around its progression and cessation, renders a return to the familiar 'status quo' an impossibility. As a consequence, issues such as lingering academic, graduation and career progression delays, postponements and disappointments, emotional sequelae of social isolation, bereavement and loss, long-term socio-economic effects and its toll on student survival and the physical effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on student energy and productivity, necessitates that holistic student support become an integral and ongoing part of student recovery and survival. Furthermore, for students and academics to effectively negotiate critical transitions and adaptations to teaching, learning and student life in general, closer collaboration and partnerships between academic staff and student counselling practitioners, is imperative.

Bantjes (2020), speaking on the launch of a new nationally co-ordinated student survey initiated by Universities South Africa (USAF), which aimed to assess South African students' mental health, highlighted the importance of the survey "at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic when many students will be feeling stressed about the disruption of their studies and anxious about the social and economic implications of the current international health crises". While speculation on the emergence and intensification of student mental health issues in the context of COVID-19 is still subjective to empirical verification, anecdotal evidence is that the abrupt move to online teaching caused significant distress for students. It is therefore imperative that Student Counselling practitioners reflect on potential mental health possibilities spawned in the wake of the pandemic and adapt their current approaches, where necessary. In so doing, Student Counselling can play a pivotal, complementary role as faculty advisors and consultants to academic departments in the quest for academic recovery, continuity and progress.

Possible mental health issues which students may experience, and which can impact on effective teaching and learning continuity and academic recovery plans, include heightened anxiety (generalized and specific to social situations and somatic concerns), feelings of social isolation and disconnection from others, including pre-existing relationships and support systems. Academic and student support staff need to be mindful of possible depression, suicidal thoughts and behaviors which can compromise academic engagement, perseverance and performance within a remote learning context. Challenges relating to time management, self-regulation and self-discipline may have become more pronounced during remote online teaching and learning as a consequence of students' personal, social and academic routines becoming blurred, disrupted and at times, unpredictable. As a result, effective time management, self-regulation and self-discipline – skills critical to academic success, particularly at tertiary level (Hensley et al. 2018; Thibodeaux et al. 2016; Zhou and Wang 2019), will become increasingly more relevant in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its myriad of ramifications for teaching and learning. These areas of life skill development, provided by support service departments such as Student Counselling, need to be accorded greater significance by both students and academic staff in Higher Education, and where possible, such sessions should be incorporated into students' lecture timetables to reinforce student participation and ensure continuity of support in formally recognized academic spaces.

Increased reliance on online teaching and learning, may also pose unique academic and emotional demands or pressures on students. Unfamiliarity with online teaching and learning software and a preference for familiar, more conventional teaching and learning methods can give rise to fear, anxiety, feelings of helplessness and being overwhelmed. Consequently, possible aversion to academic engagement, resistance to change and avoidant behavior may

emerge in some students. It is therefore important for both academic staff and student counselling services to reflect on such possibilities, and to consider ways of timeously identifying, supporting and referring such cases in the context of a collaborative partnership in student-centred learning.

TRANSFORMING STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Student counselling services globally encompasses a range of interventions, including individual and group counselling and psychotherapy; proactive, skills-based interventions that include academic, life skills and personal development workshops; career assessments, guidance and counselling, as well as trauma debriefing and crises intervention for cases that constitute a psychological or psychiatric emergency (De Jager 2012; Naidoo 2016; Naidoo and Cartwright 2018; SAACDHE 2007; Thuryrajah et al. 2017). As with other counselling contexts, participation in such interventions has traditionally involved the client and practitioner sharing the same physical space (Chester and Glass 2006). Institutional transformations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, necessitates a critical review of current practices in Student Counselling services, including accessibility and student utilization factors. This includes shifts towards a more integrated or “blended” approach to student counselling and support that combines traditional, face-to-face contact between clients and student counsellors, with technology-based, or decentralized support that connect clients (students) and clinicians (student counsellors) in different physical spaces and geographical locations. In addition, networking and partnerships with external NPOs, community-embedded counselling and support service providers such as LIFELINE and South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) (www.sadag.org), as well as possible peer support initiatives, is also necessary.

Technology-based mental health interventions are variously referred to in the literature as Telemental health (TMH), distance counselling, internet counselling, E-therapy, teletherapy and cybertherapy (HEMHA 2019). Technology-based mental health interventions are not a new concept, having been in existence for several decades (HEMHA 2019; Langarizadeh et al. 2017; Rummell and Joyce 2010. The American Telemedicine Association (ATA), (2009, as cited in HEMHA 2019, 5), defines Telemental health as “the practice of mental health specialties at a distance” using a range of technology-based tools such as video conferencing, email, text messages, chat tools, and/or telephone (Dart et al. 2016, as cited in HEMHA 2019). However, these solutions require a holistic approach, fundamentally centred around student access to an online environment when displaced from the campus. Addressing this, however, is contingent upon addressing the digital divide.

The different categories of online mental health activities include online counseling and

psychotherapy, psychoeducational websites, online support groups, self-help interventions and career assessment and guidance services (Barak and Grohol 2011; Rummell and Joyce 2010 Tirel et al. 2019). Technology-based mental health and student support services may further be categorized according the time frames of delivery; with *synchronous* services occurring in real time (e.g., video conferencing, technology, live chat, or telephone) while asynchronous services involve communication taking place at different times e.g., email, voicemail, text message (HEMHA 2019).

Literature highlights a range of practical, social and therapeutic advantages to using technology-based mental health options (e.g., Barrable, Papadatou-Pastou, and Tzotzoli 2018; Chester and Glass 2006; HEMHA 2019; Lau, Jaladin, and Abdullah 2013; Harris and Birnbaum 2014; Richards and Vigarno 2013). These include increased access, convenience and removal of physical, social and emotional barriers (HEMHA 2019; Lau et al. 2013; Richards 2009), particularly for underrepresented and/or marginalized groups such as individuals with disabilities, those living in remote areas and individuals suffering from trauma and anxiety-related conditions. Given the socio-economic, psycho-social and geographical challenges characteristic of many South African students in higher education (Bantjes et al. 2019; Naidoo and Cartwright 2018), the incorporation of technology-based student counselling options for students requires a number of considerations. These include the financial, resource and training implications of technological implementation for students, student counselling practitioners and the Student Counselling Service as a whole. Furthermore, client-related issues such as attitude and preference for, traditional versus online counselling would need to be considered, as well as student proficiency in technology use. In addition, it is imperative that student counsellors be consulted with regard to technology-based transformations to student counselling practice. In particular, student counsellor needs, competencies, preferences, professional and ethical concerns around technology-based transformation needs to be explored, as well as the degree of openness to such changes.

A shift towards e-learning and a blended approach to Student Support services has, however, significant financial implications. These include the need for basic technology devices such as a computer or laptop, to enable students to engage in online counselling with a student counsellor. Furthermore, internet access and connectivity is essential for online counseling and even online self-help interventions. Internet access would need to be made available to students on an ongoing basis, at their respective sites of residence across the country. This may not always be possible, given the remoteness of some locations which can compromise internet connectivity and speed. However, other alternatives can be explored in such instances, including the use of mobile phones which most students have access to, as well as strengthening

decentralised, community-based support structures. Transformations in student counselling practices will undeniably require collective consultation, participation and partnerships between a host of role players and stakeholders; most notably, students, student counselling practitioners, academic staff and external, community-based service providers. Furthermore, for student mental health and academic success to be effectively promoted in the context of challenging circumstances and sweeping institutional transformation, an attitude of perseverance, flexibility and openness in the face of trial-and-error possibilities, is imperative.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken an unprecedented toll on global systems, organizations, communities and institutional practices. Higher education institutions have had to rapidly adapt to the impact of the pandemic, which has highlighted new needs and systemic challenges. There is no doubt that teaching and learning as we know it, has been disrupted by the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic. However, the COVID-19 disruption also offers an opportunity to reflect on, and transform, not only teaching and learning approaches but institutional structures and processes as a whole. In particular, the transformative imperatives of structures such as Academic Support Services (Teaching and Learning Support) and Student Counselling Services which are critical to student success and throughput are necessary.

However, the need for a “blended model” that actively relies on technology for the dissemination of information, could have significant practical and psychological implication for South African students, many of whom are already face some form of disadvantage. Furthermore, the stress or mental health challenges likely to accompany abrupt moves away from what is known, can negatively impact students’ academic performance. The questionable readiness of Higher Education for online teaching and learning at such short notice highlights the need for massive investment in infrastructure, technology and staff training in ongoing and future-orientated, contingency-based virtual teaching and learning approaches. Greater effort is therefore required by the South African government, public and private enterprises and other relevant stakeholders to bridge the technological divide affecting university students. Provision of appropriate technological resources, network coverage in rural areas and cost implications of data usage, need to be addressed if South African students, and the most vulnerable in particular, are to succeed in this new era of higher education. In addition, reconfiguring counselling and student support services to align with remote or online methods of teaching and learning is imperative.

Finally, global experts have challenged Higher Education to play a more significant role in shaping the post-COVID-19 world. Harkavy et al. (2020) emphasize that the post-COVID19

world must be values-based, pinned on democracy, social justice, inclusion and equity; and that higher education institutions must serve as societal actors for the public good. Therefore, in keeping with the ideals espoused in the Education White Paper 3, fair opportunities to enter higher education institutions must be accompanied by supportive strategies to succeed in them. The adoption of technology-based student support and mental health resources to complement existing conventional practices and promote student adjustment in an increasing move towards an online teaching and learning environment, is therefore recommended. Universities across South Africa would do well to consider the opportunities COVID-19 presents in terms of redefining the delivery of student-centred teaching and learning, particularly as it relates to student support services and student wellness within a blended learning environment, without which students will not be able to effectively learn or succeed in higher education. However, this cannot be achieved without addressing the significant digital divide affecting access to learning for thousands of students in South Africa. Such actions are in line with South Africa's Higher education imperatives of equity and redress as guiding principles for institutional transformation.

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