

COVID-19: EXPOSING UNMATCHED HISTORICAL DISPARITIES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has been on the rampage and severely affected lives of many globally. The disruption resulting from the pandemic cuts across various aspects of the society such as the economic, social, environmental and educational domains. This article specifically explores the impact of COVID-19 on the higher education system in South Africa and also delves into academic challenges experienced by students during the pandemic. The article explores students' experiences during the pandemic in conjunction with challenges which existed in the higher education system before the advent of COVID-19 owing to the legacy of apartheid, transformational and other developmental issues in the South African context.

Keywords: access, COVID-19, higher education, inequality, transformation

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on the institutions of higher learning globally. As a result of the pandemic, many institutions of higher learning across the globe were forced to radically transform their models of operation in a short period of time. The South African institutions of higher learning were a no exception. In South Africa, the institutions of higher learning were already functioning under unfavourable conditions prior to COVID-19. Dominant and long-standing challenges in the sector included issues pertaining to a poor funding model for universities, a decline in state funding for tertiary institutions, fee increase contestations, racial inequalities in terms of student enrolment and staff recruitment, limited access to learning institutions and a slow pace of transformation.

This article discusses identified challenges in the higher education sector in South Africa resulting from the apartheid government and policy shortfalls of the current dispensation. The article also discusses systemic issues that were highlighted by COVID-19 within Historically Black Institutions (HBIs) and Historically White Institutions (HWIs). In addition, propositions to advance the agenda of transformation in the institutions of higher learning are articulated. Moreover, the article points to how the challenges experienced by the institutions of higher

learning resulting from the pandemic could be ameliorated in order to have a responsive higher education system that is able to tackle contemporary societal ills.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

The higher education system in South Africa has been plagued by a multitude of challenges stemming from a colonial history and the apartheid regime. Under the apartheid administration, the higher education system was structured to serve the needs of black and white population groups differently, as a means to perpetuate racial segregation. As a catalyst to drive racial divisions, the apartheid government built universities in the rural areas or former “homelands” and townships, which were the only places where most black people were allowed to reside. Those universities that catered for blacks are regarded as Historically Black Institutions (HBIs) whereas universities that served the white racial class are regarded as Historically White Institutions (HWIs). HWIs were geographically located in the inner cities and by design were meant to serve exclusively the white population group. As opposed to HBIs which were largely neglected by the apartheid government, HWIs received adequate support in terms of infrastructure development, human resources and state funding (Ilorah 2006). This meant that from their inception, HWIs were in a better position to offer quality education, train students and produce research outputs. In essence, this implies that the apartheid educational system sought to create extra-racial knowledge gaps which to a very large extent marginalised black people socially and economically. This is evident in the post-apartheid era where there are persistent and overwhelming racial inequalities (Gradin 2013; Keswell 2010; Mgobozi 2004). In the higher education institutions, these inequalities, for example, continue to persist through racial disproportion between black and white senior academics (Department of Higher Education and Training 2019b).

The efforts by the apartheid government to institutionally separate the races had lasting effects in that towards the transition period to democracy prior to 1994; HWIs were far ahead in many respects, including having a sound financial position to perform administrative duties. HBIs, however, still lagged behind. In a quest to close the gap between HWIs and HBIs and to redress racial injustices of the past, the newly-elected democratic government abolished the racial policies of the apartheid government, thus permitting all races to study at the institution of their choice. The new government also instituted a new funding policy which sought to prioritise equitable funding for all the institutions of higher learning (Department of Education 1996). Further to that, the government merged various institutions of higher learning and established other new institutions to cater for the societal and economic needs of the new dispensation (Department of Education 2002). The government, through the new policies,

therefore, re-purposed and re-mandated the institutions of higher learning with new functions.

Although the democratic government has made efforts to improve the higher education institutions and redress educational inequalities, there remain acute systemic challenges. For example, HBIs continue to experience financial and administrative challenges. According to Bozalek and Boughhey (2012), these challenges are as a result of apartheid policies in that these institutions were marginalised and denied the opportunity to develop strong capacities to manage their financial systems. Therefore, not only did the apartheid government achieve setting racial boundaries within the institutions of higher learning, but also created a fertile ground for financial maladministration in HBIs. This is evident in that HBIs continue to encounter administrative challenges which are rarely experienced by HWIs. As a result of maladministration, some HBIs have had to be placed under administration (Department of Higher Education and Training 2019a; Mouton, Louw, and Strydom 2013), thereby further delaying stability in these institutions. This brings to the fore the question of transformation in the institutions of higher learning, which is very instrumental in redressing the injustices of apartheid. Further, the challenges experienced in previously disadvantaged institutions warrant a question about the effectiveness and instrumentality of the present higher education policies. This section provided a brief history of the South African higher education system; the next section discusses the impact of COVID-19 in relation to the pre-existing higher education systemic challenges in the South African context.

COVID-19 AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

COVID-19 was first reported in China in December 2019 (World Health Organisation 2020). In January 2020, several countries across the world reported confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus. On 1 February 2020, the United States of America, Germany, Singapore, Australia, Canada and Russia reported confirmed cases of COVID-19. Africa reported its first case of COVID-19 in Egypt on the 14th of February 2020, and subsequently, several countries in sub-Saharan Africa also reported confirmed cases of COVID-19. South Africa recorded its first case of the new coronavirus on the 5th of March 2020 (Stiegler and Bouchard 2020). On the 23 March 2020, the South African Government enacted a nationwide lockdown; this resulted in the closure of all the institutions of higher learning.

The closure of the institutions of higher learning due to COVID-19 disrupted institutional operational processes and severely affected teaching and learning. Most importantly, however, the unprecedented closure of these institutions exposed transformation gaps and systematic weaknesses in the South African institutions of higher learning. For example, upon the enactment of the nationwide lockdown, some institutions struggled with migration from contact

learning to online learning. Furthermore, the academic staff in some institutions of higher learning reportedly had limited experience or training in the pedagogy of online learning (Hedding et al. 2020). Throughout the 2020 academic year, some universities continued to struggle in terms of mobilising resources (i.e., laptops and mobile data) to cater to a large number of the student population who relied on financial assistance (Cloete 2020). Hedding et al. (2020) highlighted that not only did universities struggle with supporting students to learn remotely but also experienced challenges such as providing staff members with resources to conduct their duties remotely. These challenges made it difficult for teaching and learning to continue remotely and therefore posed disruptions to the academic calendar.

Globally, the institutions of higher learning responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways. While many institutions were able to migrate to online with ease due to their adequate infrastructure support, long-term investment in information technology and digital transformation, others however were far from easily making this transition (Crawford et al. 2020). In South Africa, although some universities were able to migrate to online learning, others however, in particular HBIs, have encountered difficulties with migrating to online teaching and learning. Macupe (2020) posits that while well-resourced universities were able to continue with online learning since the start of the nationwide lockdown, HBIs have not enjoyed the same privilege due to the inability to provide staff members and students with mobile data and laptops. The situation has been exacerbated by lack of preparedness by some universities to roll-out online learning. The inability to transition from contact learning to online learning indicates a continuation of fundamental administrative and financial constraints in previously disadvantaged institutions of higher learning.

HBIs mostly consist of students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds (Ilorah 2006), an indication that students mostly affected by the pandemic in South Africa may be coming from disadvantaged backgrounds with lack of financial support. A study by Astovinick et al. (2020) confirmed that students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds were more affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. These findings highlight that disadvantaged students may have been more in need of support than financially privileged students during the pandemic. Hedding et al. (2020, 2) posited that “it is inappropriate to highlight any one particular group as being more or less vulnerable than another, but rather to see the collective in the COVID-19 situation”. In contrast, however, the author of this article holds a different view. The injustices and failures of the higher education system have to be highlighted, especially if one university or population of students is disadvantaged over another. Therefore, a call to remain oblivious on issues pertaining to inequality during the COVID-19 pandemic may be regarded as a further impediment to

transformation.

The inability of some HBIs to continue with teaching and learning during the nationwide lockdown in South Africa, while HWIs switched to online teaching and learning, is a reflection of poor policy implementation in the post-apartheid era. This indicates failures of the democratic government to redress apartheid policies in the sphere of higher education. Attempts to amend higher education policies have not translated into material benefits for the majority of previously disadvantaged people in South Africa (Mzangwa 2019). This is evident in that HBIs continue to be poorly funded despite the increased access to higher education. Decades into democracy, the impact of apartheid-era underfunding and underdevelopment of universities continues to shape the institutional typologies (Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe 2020). The White Paper for Post School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013b) and the White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Education 1997) call for transformation in the institutions of higher learning through improved access, efficient funding mechanisms, improved infrastructure and information technology. However, these calls have yet to produce results.

TRANSFORMATION

It is inconceivable to talk about the effects of COVID-19 on higher education in South Africa without making any reference to the transformational issues in the sector. This is because COVID-19 revealed the discrepancies between HBIs and HWIs. These discrepancies could be attributed to the apartheid education policies which continue to have a stranglehold long after they have been repealed, and therefore suggest the existence of slow-paced transformation in the higher education system. Transformation in higher education is regarded as an indicator for social progress (Mzangwa 2019). However, achieving transformation in this regard has shown to be somewhat slow. This is because the contemporary institutional culture of the South African higher education neither takes into consideration human experiences nor strives to correct the unfairness of the past (Dlamini 2018). The realities of students in institutions of higher learning in South Africa largely resemble those of the apartheid system. Despite the progress that has been made to transform higher education, a lot remains to be done. For example, evidence suggests that while there has been a notable growth in the higher education system, students' access, participation rates and inequality remain a concern (Cloete 2014; Council on Higher Education 2013; Schoole and Adeyemo 2016). Higher education is a commodity, in that the majority of disadvantaged groups still have limited access to learning. Bunting (2004) stipulates that access to higher education in South Africa is limited to those that are able to afford it, while the majority of the poor, in particular black people, remain outside

of the system. The majority of black people who are able to enrol in the institutions of higher learning are the working class and are often not able to service tuition fees (Bozalek and Boughhey 2012). Moreover, although the number of enrolments of black students in HWIs has increased post-1994, these numbers remain relatively low in some universities (Essop 2020). This is due to the historical nature of these universities not being racially accommodative and their expensive tuition fees, and thus enabling these institutions to continue with a culture of systemic exclusion. To some extent, this reflects a failure of policies to permeate and transform HWIs.

Transformation in higher education is a multi-fold challenge. Another element of transformation which has been highlighted by the pandemic is the funding of institutions of higher learning, a long-standing and contentious issue in South Africa since the advent of democracy and, more recently, the *Fees Must Fall* student movement. The most important source of financial support for South African public institutions of higher learning is the government (Mouton, Louw, and Strydom 2013; Statistics South Africa 2020). However, there continue to be funding disparities in the institutions of higher learning. HBIs continue to be underfunded by the state (Ilorah 2006; Green 2004; Marire 2017). Apart from inadequate financial support from the government, HBIs have a long history of funding problems, and this is because these institutions were never made to be self-sustainable by the apartheid government (Leshoro 2008). For example, these institutions still do not have strong donor funding strategies and their research output is relatively low compared to HWIs. Due to lack of proper funding models in place, HBIs tend to experience challenges which relate to attracting and retaining skilled academics (Higher Education of South Africa 2009), thereby contributing to further unsteadiness in these institutions. Bozalek and Boughhey (2012) also emphasise that HBIs, particularly the ones based in rural areas or former “homelands” are less likely to attract qualified staff than HWIs, a persisting challenge which the higher education sector needs address (Higher Education of South Africa 2009; Mathuma and McKenna 2017).

The majority of HBIs remain underdeveloped and continue to encounter financial difficulties compared to HWIs (Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe 2020). According to Leshoro (2008), the funding problems in HBIs are further exacerbated by the loss of students to HWIs where it is easier to secure funding. Boughey and McKenna (2011) also add that students tend to be attracted by higher education institutions where they are likely to be funded. This further puts HBIs at a disadvantage in terms of reduced revenue as a result of a decline in enrolments or inability to attract new enrolments. Leshoro (2008) highlights that because of challenges relating to attracting students, HBIs are left to enrol disadvantaged students who are often underprepared for university; in turn, this contributes to poor results and lack of research

capacity. Marire (2017) highlights that while the over-recruitment of underprepared students attracts more funding from government, it also imposes larger costs in terms of cultural transformation, indicating that the over-recruitment of underprepared students has a negative knock-on effect on HBIs. The unequal distribution in enrolments, with the majority of the students enrolling in HWIs over HBIs, is reflected in the enrolment statistics. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (2013a; South African Market Insights 2020), HWIs enrol more students than HBIs, and this has been a trend for a number of years. This trend is likely to continue due to globalisation and the need for HWIs to compete on a global scale. Therefore, the gap between HBIs and HWIs is likely to widen in terms of student enrolment and staff recruitment. Marire (2017) warns that HBIs will be forced to enrol underprepared students and employ less productive staff at a higher rate. This poses a risk to the existence of these institutions, and due to these challenges, there is a real possibility that some of them will be permanently left behind (Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe 2020).

Historically Black Institutions have lower student enrolments and attract low staff recruitment. Therefore, one would expect the government to be in a position to sufficiently fund these institutions. However, this has not been the case. Instead, HBIs continue to grapple with funding and this is despite the increase in budget allocation for the institutions of higher learning. The funding challenges in HBIs are compounded by lack of physical infrastructure, laboratories, lecture halls, resourced libraries, student housing and also governance challenges (Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe 2020). The outbreak of COVID-19 has exposed the latent challenges within higher education in South Africa. In particular, challenges relating to inequality. While some students were able to continue with online teaching and learning, others expressed that they experienced challenges which encompassed among others, poor living conditions which were not conducive for studying, no access to a laptops or smartphones, limited network coverage, and hunger (Motala and Menon 2020). Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe (2020) emphasise that the migration to online learning brought into focus existing socio-economic ills in South Africa's higher education system. The move to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the whole education system; however, the impacts differed between HBIs and HWIs (Czerniewicz et al. 2020). The challenges experienced by students in HBIs have been noted by the Department of Higher Education and Training, which indicated that some students from HBIs and those from working-class families battled with online learning (Bhengu 2020). This claim has further been highlighted by Magaba (2020), who posited that before the lockdown was enacted due to the coronavirus pandemic, HBIs lagged behind in terms of technology infrastructure for online learning. This, however, has not been the case in HWIs. In South Africa, the implementation of the pedagogy of online teaching and

learning during COVID-19 took place in a society that had been classified as the most unequal in the world (Cleophas 2020), thus further making it difficult for most universities to transition to online learning due to students' differential socioeconomic circumstances.

As already stated, the South African higher education sector is characterised by a number of systemic issues which require pro-transformation interventions. Hence, a number of studies have suggested possible interventions to this effect. For example, these studies proposed for new higher education policies to advance transformation, the need for social justice and increasing access to higher education, a changed institutional culture that will pave a way for transformation and making higher education affordable for the poor (Luvalo 2019; Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete 2008; Dlamini 2018; Cele and Menon 2006). In light of this, the current article, therefore, sought to expand from those previous studies by further highlighting the existing sectorial transformation gaps and inequality shortfalls. The article, however, highlighted these challenges at the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic which to a reasonable extent has forced the higher education administrators to re-think the higher education model and transformational agenda in a slightly new approach. The current article therefore finds a point of convergence with Le Grange (2020), who cautioned that COVID-19 will require universities to transform radically and adopt the model of online teaching and learning.

BRIDGING THE ANTI-TRANSFORMATION GAP BETWEEN HWI AND HBI IN SOUTH AFRICA

The notion that the institutions of higher learning in South Africa remain unequal and untransformed cannot be over-emphasised. This has been evident, mostly during the pandemic, with some universities being able to shift and continue with online learning, and others resorting to the discontinuation of academic activities. The ability for some institutions to continue with academic activities whereas others struggled is a feature of the unresolved inequalities between institutions resulting from the apartheid legacy and unresolved systemic challenges post-1994 (Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe 2020). Akoojee and Nkomo (2007) and Badat and Sayed (2014) emphasise that the South African higher education system is structurally shaped by the history and policies of apartheid.

Given that the apartheid policies continue to have a stranglehold on the higher education sector even after their abolishment, it therefore remains imperative that the current and reformed higher education policies respond to and reverse the injustices of the past within the sector. Most importantly, however, the higher education policies need to penetrate and address the unevenness between HBIs and HBIs. This will aid in developing a robust and responsive post-school education and training system as envisaged by the National Development Plan (NDP)

and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (The Presidency 2012; Department of Higher Education and Training 2013b). Promoting equity, particularly in terms of resources, between previously disadvantaged and advantaged institutions holds potential benefits. For example, equal distribution of funding may help save HBIs which have, for decades, been at risk of extinction due to financial incapacities; this is highlighted by the number of these institutions which have been placed in administration since 1994. Furthermore, a fair distribution of resources may help HBIs to enrol more postgraduate students, and therefore generate more research outputs, which are important for income generation and sustainability of institutions (Masango 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic has been instrumental in demonstrating higher education disparities in South Africa. A number of students have been left behind academically due to institutional disadvantages (Bhengu 2020; Cloete 2020; Magaba 2020; Motala and Menon 2020). This is because some institutions, in particular HBIs, were not equipped with the necessary infrastructure for students to learn remotely. It is therefore fundamental to promote policy reforms in the higher education sector in order to curb institutional challenges relating to poor infrastructure. This implies that in order to reduce the gap between HBIs and HWIs, a dedicated state allocation for infrastructure development in previously disadvantaged institutions is necessary. Priority, however, should be placed on a sound information technology infrastructure to enable online learning. Further to that, and due to the increase in the number of student enrolments, HBIs have to be equipped with adequate student housing, resourced libraries and laboratories, and lecture halls. It is important to note that investment in academic infrastructure requires strong financial management capabilities. This means that having robust governance systems is necessary to enable transformation in HBIs so that they match the standards of HWIs (Dlamini 2018).

Transformation within the institutions of higher learning in South Africa is not limited to investment in infrastructure and financial capacitation of tertiary institutions, but also includes affordable tuition fees. Tuition fees in HBIs are relatively lower compared to the tuition fees in HWIs. To some extent, this has rendered the standards of education in HBIs to be of lower quality than in HWIs. In addition, the high tuition fees in HWIs have structurally served to exclude the majority of the student population from disadvantaged backgrounds (Wangenge-Ouma 2012; Public Servants Association 2016), and thus channelling these students to attend HBIs. This in turn, is likely to strain the resources of HBIs due to the responsibility to service a large group of the student population with a low budget allocation. Tuition fees are therefore an important aspect of transformation within the higher education sector since they determine which institutions students are likely to attend. In essence, tuition fees determine access to

university and indirectly contribute to the throughput rates. The discrepancies in tuition fees between HBIs and HWIs may also strengthen the narrative that HBIs offer a poor quality of education and training, and therefore impact negatively on the image and ultimately on the revenue of these institutions. Poor reforms for the education system have been cited as a cause for ineffectiveness within the system (Van der Berg et al. 2011; Lange 2017). Therefore, future reforms on tuition fees need to prioritise equity on tuition fees across previously advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. This may improve the standards of education in HBIs and support them to become competitive in the light of South Africa's economic and developmental goals.

RETHINKING THE CURRENT HIGHER EDUCATION MODEL IN SOUTH AFRICA

The institutions of higher learning play a key role in shaping spheres of global interest such as economies, government policies, globalisation, and emerging technologies. Likewise, the institutions of higher learning are shaped by a number of factors world-wide. COVID-19 had a tremendous effect on the institutions of higher learning and much as it has negative effects on many layers of the education system globally, it has also invited novel discourses about the higher education system. Some discourses, arguably, would have not surfaced much earlier without taking into account the COVID-19 pandemic. In South Africa and other parts of the world, the discourses which feature prominently pertain to efficient methods of teaching and learning during and after the pandemic, making universities self-sustainable through multiple streams for generating revenue, increased state subsidies for tertiary institutions, increasing research outputs through intra- and inter-university partnerships, increasing access to learning, and increasing student support initiatives (Astovinick et al. 2020; Mhlanga and Moloji 2020; Bao 2020; Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe 2020; Motala and Menon 2020). Pertinent to this article, however, is the implementation of new ways of teaching and learning and funding for institutions of higher learning. These are, debatably, key factors determining sustainability and the ability for tertiary institutions to carry out their mandate in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

The institutions of higher learning, throughout history have been shaped by a variety of factors such as colonialism, apartheid, scientific and technological innovations, internationalisation and globalisation (Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe 2020). More recently, COVID-19 has radically transformed the higher education sector globally (Astovinick et al. 2020). In terms of teaching and learning, COVID-19 has necessitated universities to migrate to the online mode of teaching and learning. This, however, has not been easy due to the state of resources in some universities. Nevertheless, the migration to online teaching and learning

remains a priority due to future uncertainties. Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe (2020) highlight that the advantage of investing in online learning is that it is appropriate for ensuring continuity during disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that, in terms of re-thinking the new model of higher education, the institutions of higher learning have to adopt online teaching and learning in order to execute academic activities. This is especially important for HBIs with limited resources and infrastructure to accommodate the high number of student enrolments. The online model of teaching and learning, if properly implemented, may also save costs related to the frequent maintenance of facilities such as lecture halls, libraries and student residences. Furthermore, this model may decrease institutional expenditures on student residences and therefore enable re-prioritisation of budgets. Emerging technology institutions will likely invest in online learning. Therefore, in preparation to migrate to the online model of teaching and learning, the government should encourage the institutions of higher learning to extend contact teaching and research activities to the online medium and fully integrate the online higher education system (Ogunode 2020). Exceptions to online learning, however, should be made for specialised programmes that require contact learning and practical components. There are potential benefits of online education for the institutions of higher learning. For example, the adoption of online teaching and learning may improve access since it does not restrict universities to enrol a smaller number of students due to limited infrastructure. Cautiously, however, the full implementation of online learning will require universities to employ strict quality assurance measures on the standards of teaching and learning. Furthermore, for a successful implementation of this model of learning, universities should undertake the responsibility to train and orientate staff members about the pedagogy of online teaching and learning.

The South African higher education system has, for decades, operated under unstable and challenging circumstances. This includes, for example, the apartheid regime, sanctions on the government prior to 1994, demands for decolonisation of higher education, the *Fees Must Fall* student movement, and presently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Another challenge which has been a bone of contention for decades in the higher education sector in South Africa is the funding of tertiary institutions (Mubangizi 2005; Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete 2008; Wangenge-Ouma 2010; Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe 2020). The institutions of higher learning in South Africa, in particular HBIs, were underfunded by the government during the apartheid era. The issue of underfunding continues to be a challenge. Mubangizi (2005) argues that the funding policy for South African universities is unfair and unconstitutional. This is because the policy does not take into consideration the disparities between HBIs and HWIs, instead, it violates the right to equality and perpetuates the disadvantages of the past (Mubangizi 2005).

The funding framework for tertiary institutions has implications for the development and success of the institutions of higher learning. Although determined by a number of factors such as the number of enrolments and human resources, the unequal funding allocation to institutions, however, is likely to result in unfair competition between HBIs and HWIs. This may also be an impediment to the development of HBIs and thus undermine the national imperative goals envisaged by the NDP to have an enrolment of 1.6 million students in 2030 (The Presidency 2012). This means that the current funding framework needs to be revised so that it addresses funding inequities. This will likely contribute towards creating stability in universities that are already ailing. Aside from funding disproportions between institutions, tertiary institutions in South Africa are underfunded and there has been a notable decline in government subsidies to higher education institutions (Bitzer and de Jager 2018; Wangenge-Ouma and Cloete 2008). The decrease in subsidies has further been exacerbated by budget cuts during the 2020/2021 financial year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus leaving a number of universities in financial disarray. The reduction of budgets in this regard is likely to have a lasting impact on the finances of many institutions beyond 2020. Hence, Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe (2020) stress that post the pandemic, priority should be the emergence of a system that is funded effectively in order to enhance the intellectual and social development of students and institutions.

Many tertiary institutions are less likely to be financially unscathed post-COVID-19. Therefore, other than relying on state subsidies and tuition fees, these institutions will need to devise innovative strategies for increasing funding to keep afloat. This means that universities must be self-sustainable. One of the basic strategies that universities need to improve in order to generate a third stream of income and minimise the impact of COVID-19 on their revenue is to strengthen their research capacity. Growing a research-intensive portfolio has served as an important method of generating income in order to supplement an institution's income from student fees and government subsidies (Swartz et al. 2019). In expanding their research capacity, universities also need to forge collaborations with other institutions locally and internationally; this may be particularly important for HBIs with low research outputs and limited global visibility. Research collaborations are key in promoting university rankings and by implication may serve as marketing strategies. Universities may also consider establishing business enterprises offering short learning programmes; these may serve as support structures for generating additional income for the institutions. In South Africa, university business enterprises have been established by, at most, a few HWIs, thus indicating an unexplored opportunity for HBIs.

Universities operate on a business model. Therefore, due to a decrease in budgets by the

government, cost-cutting measures where possible should be implemented. These cost-cutting measures may be applicable in instances where there are more losses than gains on certain academic programmes. In those instances, re-curriculation or a total phasing-out of those programmes may be necessary. Contrary to this however, universities should also tap into the introduction or phasing-in of new academic programmes that are relevant to the current and future socioeconomic and developmental needs; such programmes may contribute to an increase in revenue.

Access to tertiary education in South Africa continues to be a challenge for the majority of the population (Walker and Mkwanzani 2015). This is largely due to the high levels of poverty and inequality (Moses, Van der Berg, and Rich 2017). Most tertiary institutions in South Africa are geographically located in urban regions and far away from a number of disadvantaged citizens; this makes it even more difficult for many potential university students to access these institutions. As a means to increase institutional revenue, universities may consider exploiting an opportunity by increasing regional campuses across the country, particularly in semi-rural areas where there are many young people not in education, employment or training. The addition of regional campuses will, however, require methodical feasibility assessments and strong governance systems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The article highlighted the extent to which the higher education sector in South Africa is marked by systemic challenges. Additionally, the article demonstrated how COVID-19 has served as a catalyst in revealing these systemic issues. Importantly, however, the article attempted to advance the higher education theory by calling for sector-wide policy reforms on transformation and the funding model. Furthermore, the article makes a contribution towards the advancement of higher education through suggesting strategies that are likely to result in *Academic Development*. *Academic Development* relates to, for instance, adopting measures that will enable institutional development, curriculum development, student and staff development, equality and redress (Scott 2009). This is particularly important not only for the South African higher education sector but also for other higher education sectors in Africa that reportedly continue to experience challenges of transformation and poor funding (Drape et al. 2016).

Although the article focused primarily on the higher education system in South Africa, it is argued that the interventions suggested hold potential benefits for other higher education sectors in African. This is because the institutions of higher learning in Africa, in many respects, experience challenges that are structurally similar due to the rich history of colonialism, similar developmental and socioeconomic issues. For example, universities in Africa continue to

experience challenges relating to transformation, poor governance and funding, poor infrastructure and limited access to universities (Drape et al. 2016; Dei, Osei-Bonsu, and Amponsah 2020). These challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Czerniewicz et al. 2020). The current article, therefore, may prove to be instrumental in terms of advancing higher education policy reforms on transformation, inequality and redress. The article may also encourage the higher education sectors in Africa to enact responsive university funding policies for sustainable development. Eventually, these policies may materialise and yield capable institutions that are able to respond to African challenges.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to draw attention to historical disadvantages in the system of higher learning in South Africa. The article also sought to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on the system that was already fragmented due to policy and governance inefficiencies. COVID-19 has exposed transformation gaps in the institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Addressing issues of transformation is important for the sector and the national developmental goals. Therefore, the researcher suggests that transformation should be top of the agenda in every institution of higher learning and that it ought to be measurable. Thus, universities have to bear a responsibility to enact policies that will promote institution-wide transformation in measurable rather than superficial terms.

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