The Idea of a University in the Post-Covid-19 World

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Abstract

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Arundhati Roy, Azadi: Freedom, Fascism, Fiction, 2020

Almost everything that has been thought about repurposing a university before 2020, has had to be rethought with the advent of Covid-19. Many governments and institutions have had to rethink their business models and process in order to adapt in the new normal. The clichéd statement that says 'do not waste a good crisis' rang truer for many leaders across the world.

All of a sudden, many institutions of higher learning faced an existential crisis which brought their delivery models into serious turmoil. How do universities deliver education under conditions where lecturers and students are completely removed from their natural habitat – the lecture hall? And more importantly, how do these institutions continue to relay impactful research and scholarship to their respective communities – in our case, South Africa and Africa?
That was the challenge!

A survey by the *International Association of Universities*, an affiliate organisation of United Nations Educational, scientific, and Cultural organisation (UNESCO), provides a picture of the global impact of the pandemic on universities. These entail among others:

- the physical closure of universities and therefore disruption to teaching and learning, with many shifting to different forms of distant and non-contact teaching and learning, including online.
- decrease in retention and new enrolment of students, with some current students dropping out as they could not cope with online learning, and prospective entrants to the system deferring their applications.
- weakening of partnerships between universities, as institutions became inward looking, focusing on coping mechanisms and new ways of self-management.
- negative impact on international student mobility, resulting in decreased international student numbers.
- disruption to examination timetables, with cancellations in certain regions, delays in the release dates for results, and delays in the resumption of the academic year; and,
- the negative impact on community engagement initiatives, while research output to contribute to finding of solutions to the pandemic increased.[1]

Even though universities faced a different and rapidly changing context where adaptation is a requirement, the basic idea of a university as institution of innovation remains unchanged. The past three centuries show that a university pursues knowledge and intellectual enquiry in a given social context in ways that impact modes of production and production structures to sustain and reproduce human life, the environment or technology.

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[1]   Marinoni, Giorgio; van't Land, Hilligje; Jensen, Trine (2020) *The Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education Around the World: IAU Global Survey Report*. Paris, International Association of Universities. Accessed from https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau_covid19_and_he_survey_report_final_may_2020.pdf, on 01 February 2020.

Whereas the university is regarded as the high point of innovation, the community, industry, and the state are important epistemic sites and form part of national and international innovation systems. It is for this reason that research and development forms part of the institutional arrangements that helps key players in society to co-create value, wealth, economic growth, and a better quality of life.

And so Zeleza is right when he says '…universities face various alternative and overlapping futures ranging from restoration, to evolution, to transformation. These interlinked scenarios encompass every aspect of university affairs from the modalities of teaching and learning, financial models, leadership skills, and institutional governance systems to modes of external engagements'[2] Zeleza, (2021).

He proposes that 'constructing new futures for African universities and knowledge economies entails institutional, intellectual and ideological struggles and negotiations, and different ways of studying and assessing the value proposition of universities not only for students and other internal stakeholders, but also for African societies and diasporas in their complex national and transnational dimensions, articulations, and intersections'[3] Zeleza, (2021).

Leading change in higher education has been a major challenge in most Sub-Saharan African countries where there is sluggish economic growth which leads to extreme poverty, resource constraints and ill-health, wars and displacement of people and governments that are incapable of providing home-grown solutions to their citizens.

Learning by doing in the Covid-19 environment

Like most institutions, Unisa has had to rapidly adjust into the new normal in order to remain resilient – thanks to the longstanding distance learning model that we kept innovating for more than five decades prior. The greatest leap forward has been the fully online academic offerings; from registration right up to assessment, including

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[2]   Zeleza, P. Higher Education in a Post-COVID-19 World: Challenges and Opportunities for African Universities. CODESRIA Bulletin Online, No. 14, June 2021.
[3]   Ibid.

graduation ceremonies. In other words, much as the disruption has separated people socially, it has also brought us together in new and creative ways.

In the normal course of business, prior to the onset of the pandemic, we often deal with high numbers of young people seeking seats in our universities; lack or inadequate technologies; and inadequate expertise for online teaching, etc. Virtually every education institution in Africa struggled with this transition mainly due to the lack of the requisite information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, inadequate expertise for online pedagogies and inability to provide appropriate devices to their students and staff.

Although the transition to fully online academic offerings was not entirely smooth, the university management saw the pandemic not only as a problem but, an opportunity to accelerate the transformation of the university, especially in the acquisition of digital capabilities. Transitioning to online environment requires agile systems and structures to support digitalised teaching and learning.

Over the past 30 years, ODL leaders had to deal with social, economic, and political factors that are pushing distance education towards the future. Without any doubt, technology has been a key driver of change that permeates through these factors. Technology itself presents us with huge possibilities to achieve greater things, faster, more efficiently and hopefully, cheaper. But, in the context of Africa inadequate supply of laptops, data, the cost of data and connectivity infrastructure can serve as barriers to accessing fully online learning opportunities for poor students who are located in the periphery, far from the cities. In this sense, Covid-19 also brings our broader social inequalities into bold relief.

In order to lead the transition to the 'new normal' as university managers, our major concerns were not only learning, teaching or research. It was also operations, academic support, and business continuity. All of sudden, we were expected to manage people who are unfamiliar with working remotely; deal with demotivated employees who are going through deep grief of losing loved ones and colleagues

during the pandemic; students who are also anxious and not sure of how to move forward. We had to do a 'systems think' about the operations and the academic project, including how we deliver our services to students and academics.

The pandemic has assisted us to critically reflect on the work that we are doing, especially our delivery models and quality assurance practices. In the African context, our quest to remain resilient and focused on our core mandate happens at the intersection of the challenges and opportunities brought by new discourses on decoloniality and the ever-changing digital age we find ourselves in.

Unisa's vision is to be the African university shaping futures in the service of humanity. The changes brought by the pandemic mean that we double our efforts towards the attainment of our vision.

All the innovations that UNISA had to introduce in the 'new normal' have had financial, human resource and technological implications. It was certainly not cheap, and the university had to reprioritise allocated resources. It was a huge disruption after all, and as you can imagine, contact universities found themselves in a worst situation compared to long distance institutions.

As we look forward to the future, we hope to accelerate our digital transformation journey towards a quality, affordable and accessible education that empowers individuals and communities. The biggest challenge is to ensure that as we transform our universities, we do not exclude the poor and marginalised communities. We dare not fail.