Steering and Rowing through a Crisis

Pandemic Leadership in Higher Education

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Abstract

Navigating the 'new normal' imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, requires agile and effective leadership to guide the South African higher education institutions through a looming crisis that would affect teaching, learning, and research indefinitely. In this new academic year (2021), lessons and insights from this experience can be identified and articulated for their impact on prospects and possibilities for leadership. This chapter uses the experience of the University of Johannesburg to describe the strategies which were used to support the transition to emergency remote teaching, the management processes that underpinned the transition, and the factors informing future efforts to bolster institutions against crises. It furthermore focuses the attention on the pedagogical implications of the response to the pandemic alongside the new demands which were placed on a higher education landscape that was already mired in complexity, scarcity, and change. The strategies used to chart an alternative path for universities through the pandemic will continue to inform the development of new pedagogies, learning modalities, and management strategies to support navigating through an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable global landscape.

Keywords: COVID-19; pedagogy; higher education; crisis leadership; governance

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a crisis of a truly global nature, where higher education systems were thrown into turmoil and stakeholders across management levels needed to coordinate responses in order to save the academic year. With the first murmurs of a looming pandemic, the higher education sector perhaps did not read the warning signs early enough. The start of the academic year in South Africa, in January, is usually marred by funding challenges and the battle for admissions at universities which offer limited spaces (Badat 2016; Misra 2019). Against the backdrop of this already fraught context, the pandemic became a reality with rapid announcements of

South Africa's lockdown in March 2020 which essentially called for a halt to all activities and a confinement of its people to their homes. Like the rest of the country, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) entered lockdown, signalling an end to teaching and learning in the traditional contact mode. The world as we knew it would change, opening the space for new narratives and a reimagining of the university.

Central to any examination of this period, is a focus on how higher education institutions navigate periods of disruption. This question matters particularly, given the potential that disruptions have to 'tear at the fabric of…institution[s]' (Gigliotti 2017:1) and to destabilise their ability to deliver on their core educational project. The pandemic and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) together opened new possibilities for universities as a result of the major shifts needed to the model within which universities operate, and which required deft steering and architectural shifts to support the reorientation (Motala & Menon 2020).

At the beginning of the pandemic, a number of issues and challenges confronted higher education institutions as they managed the pivot to online and emergency remote teaching (ERT). On one level, there were important shifts needed in the institutional planning and management, requiring agility and flexibility in the trialling of new interventions and processes. However, there were also significant material considerations, including the financial, environmental, and resource constraints faced by students and some staff, and the importance of resolving these barriers to participation, in order to safeguard the academic year in whichever form it would need to take. This chapter considers the decisions that had to be made and the ways in which it called on the prior experiences of UJ's management team, enabling the strategies which were used to support the transition to ERT, the management processes that underpinned the transition, and the factors informing future efforts to bolster institutions against crises. The focus is on the key lessons that were learned from the pandemic experience while not losing sight of the emergent possibilities for future work in higher education leadership, teaching, and learning.

At UJ, the governance model which was used, emphasised participation in both the making and implementation of decisions. This deviation from traditional centralised models of governance which are dominant in higher education (Misra 2019), enabled information at UJ to flow in multiple directions and stimulated the ownership of the processes which were required for a major shift to online teaching. Osborne and Gaebler (1992:32) argue that 'those who steer the boat have more power over its destination than those who row it.' It can be counter-argued that in the pandemic crisis, whilst management could steer, it had also to focus its attention on the mechanics of rowing, on the path

to the destination and, more importantly, on how to counter challenges or obstacles on the journey. The section to follow provides some differentiation between the practices of 'rowing' (management) and 'steering' (leadership) in order to inform a discussion of the strategies which were taken at UJ to offset the worst of the effects of the pandemic's fallout on higher education.

Charting a Course Through Crisis

It is a fact that university leaders find themselves at the helm of institutions that require continuous change, in an environment characterised by 'steady-state chaos' (Gigliotti 2017:92). Ordinarily, they rarely encounter the kinds of crises that could create lasting institutional damage and are therefore less likely to be prepared when it occurs. By way of illustration of 'steady-state chaos,' perennial disruptions due to fees, admissions, or student loans characterise the South African higher education system (Jansen 2017).

To 'chart a course through crisis,' institutions must have a clear sense of where they are going, with the challenges currently and potentially affecting their operations, and the tools they have available to find their way through. The complex interrelation between higher education institutions and the societies that they serve has thus given rise to a field of scholarship, concerned not only with crises within higher education – such as internal conflicts about the meaning and canon of disciplines, or the pace of transformation and diversity initiatives – but also crises affecting higher education, emerging from mainly external factors. It is recognised that while higher education institutions are vulnerable to both internal and external shocks and shifts, crises also emerge as a result of the confluence of internal and external dynamics that affect an institution's capacity to neutralise the worst effects of an event (Gigliotti 2017; Misra 2019). The following example is illuminating in this regard.

Prior to 2020, South Africa's most recent encounter with a crisis on a massive scale was the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) and #FeesMustFall (FMF) protests that erupted in 2015. During these protests, classes were regularly disrupted and often cancelled; gatherings sometimes turned violent as a result of the tensions created by heavy securitisation on campuses; and important events on the academic calendar, including exams, were threatened by the uncertainty and unrest that existed on campuses around the country (CSVR 2017). These experiences were not uniform, however, with cleavages of race, class, and geography cutting across the system and impacting the strategies that were taken at different institutions to resolve the crisis and return to teaching and learning.

RMF/FMF is a classic example of how a national crisis can erupt with quite local and institutionally distinct effects and features. While some universities were forced to cancel classes and sometimes shut down entirely,

others, such as UJ, did not lose any teaching days and managed to continue the academic programme relatively successfully. In part this can be attributed to the existing infrastructure, planning, and resourcing that could support the rapid shift to ERT, as UJ had been developing these facets of its institutional offering in preparation for the 4IR (UJ 2020).

In a sense this is where the RMF/FMF experience did not sufficiently mirror the COVID-19 pandemic's impact. While university leaders were plunged into a state of crisis during the student protests, there was space within their management practices for the worst effects of the disruption to be ameliorated. By contrast, the pandemic has a global reach with direct national consequences, unevenly impacting multiple levels of university operations from teaching to research and strategic partnerships (Izumi, Sukhwani, Surjan, & Shaw 2020; Mncube, Mutongoza, & Olawale 2021). The pandemic with its 'shock and awe' left leaders with little time to craft strategic responses before the demand for action became overwhelming. Whilst countries have had to deal with crises of different orders of severity, like the tsunami in Thailand in 2004 or the Tohoku tsunami in Japan in 2011, there have not been crises since the world wars that had the kind of global impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had (Motala & Menon 2020). How then do university leaders manage crises with this kind of long-term reach and impact of COVID-19 in a context where the variables of the pandemic are unpredictable, and the ramifications extend beyond the control of any university leadership team?

It is remarkable that crisis situations have the potential to throw generally effective leaders and leadership strategies into turmoil. In part this can be explained by the sheer unpredictability that is generated by crisis periods, which runs counter to the predictability or consistency that is required for organisational leadership practices to be effective on a day-to-day basis (Fortunato, Gigliotti, & Ruben 2018). The FMF experience at UJ demonstrated that despite the unpredictability of a mass student movement that threatened to destabilise the core project of higher education, the leadership strategy that was adopted at the university was able to counter and ameliorate major disruptions. There is a need to recognise that UJ's experiences with the FMF crisis enabled it to steer this university through the pandemic crisis – this, despite the fact that Genshaft (2014) admits that higher education as a sector is generally poorly prepared to deal with crises, given the low frequency of its occurrence coupled with the tendency to focus on the educational project at the expense of developing capacity to deal with the unforeseen. Here crisis is distinguished from the 'steady-state chaos' that is mentioned previously. Chaos speaks to the idea of disarray or turmoil, while crisis is defined by participants, according to the research of Gigliotti (2017), as any unpredictable event that disrupts the core work and mission of the institution and could lead to lasting damage reputationally, infrastructurally, or operationally. Thus,

while 'chaos' defines the day-to-day experience of those running universities within Gigliotti's study of higher education crisis management, it shifts into 'crisis' at the moment that lives are placed at risk or when disruptions render normal academic routines impossible. This intense disruption became the case for many universities during FMF and other governance crises.

In an important analysis of crisis leadership during the FMF movement in South Africa, Misra (2019) proposes three core assumptions that inform an understanding of crisis leadership: 1) Leading an organisation during a crisis is different to leading it under normal circumstances; 2) crisis management is different to crisis leadership; and 3) crisis leadership is a unique practice that is deeply impacted by context. While this seems self-evident, on closer inspection, it provides a framework for understanding the features that distinguish crisis leadership as a practice and field of inquiry.

Institutional responses to crises veer between crisis management and crisis leadership, where the former is concerned with the procedural and operational direction which is required to bring situations under control and delegate roles and responsibilities. The latter requires university leaders who are capable of executing a vision through the crisis, offering support and guidance to staff, students, and other stakeholders, and harnessing difficult situations towards productive and generative outcomes (Fortunato *et al.* 2018; Motala & Menon 2020). Crisis management is described as procedural, technical, and operational, focused on identifying and fixing problems as it emerges, directing resources and personnel, and reconfiguring operations to secure the situation (Porche 2009; Kahn & Louw 2013). Crisis leadership comprises and goes beyond crisis management to include managing the social and broader institutional dimension of the crisis, including guiding stakeholders towards a long-term vision, managing psychosocial and environmental support, and identifying opportunities: 'Leaders who can manage crisis events successfully can create opportunities for organisational renewal while developing their own skills' (Ulmer *et al.* 2011, cited in Misra 2019:33).

In the case of the FMF/RMF movement in 2015, it was clear that university leaders largely resorted to crisis management when the student movement was still emergent and relatively unpredictable in its course of action. In Misra's study of six universities affected by RMF/FMF (Misra 2019), she finds that staff reported events being managed on an *ad hoc* basis, with vice-chancellors spreading thin across trying to manage stakeholder relationships, be present during campus unrest, and delegate responsibilities across staff. The key concerns underpinning this approach were to ensure that the academic year could be salvaged and exams could be written. However, there were also concerns specifically related to managing the unfolding protests, including balancing the need to protect students' rights to protest

against the safety of other staff and students, and protecting university facilities (Jansen 2017; Habib 2019).

By 2016, with protests becoming an increasing feature of the university calendar, vice-chancellors and other university leaders started to take seriously the need for a more coordinated, strategic approach to managing the crisis, including improving communication, 'delegating certain responsibilities to different offices, and working systemically with other university leaders, as well as the Ministry of Higher Education and Training' (Misra 2019:85). There was recognition that this was now a system-wide issue, requiring a more coordinated response, with greater collaboration among university staff as well as between leaders at different institutions (Jansen 2017; Misra 2019). An important lesson from the FMF/RMF movement for the COVID-19 pandemic was that leading in times of crisis goes beyond managing the event and its immediate fallout; it requires the sensitive handling of relationships, identifying and pursuing a long-term vision that appropriately responds to the gaps or tensions that are illuminated in the process, and ensuring that effective planning and monitoring are in place to deal with future events. These became central to navigating the novel circumstances which were resulting from the pandemic, ensuring that teaching and learning would be at the core of UJ 'way through' an unfolding crisis.

Responding to the Pandemic: Steadying the Boat

Though the university's mission and purpose centre around teaching and research, the extreme complexity of each of these areas requires substantial contributions from a wide variety of stakeholders, systems, structures, policies, and more. The vast interconnections and multifaceted natures of the various structures and systems involve students, academics, management, administration, and various other affiliated structures and stakeholder groups. The impact of the pandemic on each of the stakeholder groups at UJ extended beyond the individuals into the university context and into their immediate and extended families, networks, and environs.

Whilst the university community, comprising staff and students, was the major constituency that needed to be focusing on the core functions of the university to continue, the supply chain that is contingent on the university was also affected. Critical to understanding UJ's response to the pandemic, was the fact that a myriad of decisions had to be taken, including the management of COVID-19 protocols, security, responding to government requests for information, and other matters related to the core operations of the university. This forms part of the process of 'steadying the boat' – ensuring that the plans, tools, and resources that were invested in navigating through the crisis are well-founded and sound. The collective leadership at UJ was always forward-

looking, with online capabilities developed as far back as 2005. This meant that the foundations were in place and would hold the university in good stead. The direction of teaching and learning at the university highlighted the critical decisions that had to be made and the key decision to continue teaching and learning, using an online learning management system. The immediate priority of the university was to deal with Semester 1 whilst planning ahead for the next semester.

The Vice Chancellor's Circular of 24 March 2020, which followed the announcement of a national lockdown by the President, signalled that it was not business as usual. UJ commenced its intense planning without awaiting signals from government. The university was already one step ahead and would later also provide strategic advice to government and other bodies, including universities in the system. Whilst at this stage, consideration had not been given to what would be a protracted period of multiple iterations of lockdowns. In the period following this communication, the senior leadership team at the university had to consider how to rescue the academic year and manage the consequences that unfolded with the progression of time. Unlike other institutions, UJ provided a safety net for students who were unable to return to their homes, allowing them to continue staying in residences with all protocols in place. The complexity of the decisions which were needed, must be viewed in the context of the headcount enrolments for the years 2020 and 2021 which, interestingly, demonstrated a marked increase, despite expectations that the pandemic would interfere with this (UJ 2020). UJ is a comprehensive institution, with a significant number of programmes requiring theory and practice, work-integrated learning (WIL) and/or internships. For example, both in social work and teacher education programmes, students needed to complete practicals in off-site environments in order to meet the requirements of the professional bodies and of the qualification. In science and engineering, modules comprise both theory and practical components that are linked and had to be reconceptualised and shifted to a block period of teaching, as lockdown levels eased. This would pose an additional significant challenge to the continuation of teaching and learning.

The apparent simplicity of the decision to continue teaching and learning belied the magnitude of the work which was required to affect this transition. The complexity of this decision would require an interventionist approach in order to cascade the decision into the various academic and support structures. UJ was in a position to utilise existing systems to kick-start these processes. Substantial investments had already been made to the ICT infrastructure and the learning management system (LMS), Blackboard (Bb) as far back as 2005. These became integral to supporting the transition to ERT, which is described by Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond (2020) where in 'contrast to experiences that are planned from the beginning and designed

to be online, ERT is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances.' At UJ, the dilemma was to meet the challenge of remote teaching and learning whilst the university itself was working remotely. Prior to even government signalling that 'no student should be left behind,' UJ proactively planned, prepared, and implemented ERT.

Given the digital inequalities in the South African society, the use of online learning technologies (such as virtual and augmented reality) were not options that could be viably pursued. Academics used YouTube videos, home-made videos on cell phones, and voice and other WhatsApp facilities to demonstrate the practical skills that had to be developed. The UJ Quality Assurance (QA) Report (UJ 2020) describes in some detail the lengths to which academics went to take teaching and learning to the students in their various locations and contexts, but also acknowledges the limitations of online delivery methods, especially in the development of applied and practical competencies. Whereas the university provides the studio, laboratory, technical, and other spaces which are needed for teaching and learning in these areas, students in their homes did not have such access to equivalent facilities or resources. One of the lessons to be learned from this experience is that fewer limitations on access to higher education spaces across the country, such as to laboratories or libraries, would have enhanced the experience for many students over the period. The argument to be made is that higher education institutions in a time of crisis should seek ways to collaborate and share facilities, ideas, and resources to the benefit of both the staff and the students.

UJ has always articulated itself as the 'university of the people,' with a strategic focus on widening access and ensuring success. With more than 50 percent of students on some form of financial aid, available funding is not always conducive to optimal teaching and learning, with students needing assistance with accommodation, equipment, technology, food, and other necessities (UJ 2020). The UJ decision was reached in full acknowledgement of the ramifications that such a decision would have on its finances and operations. Once the critical decision of transition to ERT had been reached, a reprioritisation of budgets was almost immediately undertaken to ensure the appropriate resourcing that was required. UJ was financially sound and was able to draw on reserves in a climate of austerity. Tough decisions such as a freeze on new appointments with priority being given to exceptional cases, required for core business, no bonuses, and a critical review of budgets of the various domains were key components of the UJ strategy. In a climate where job losses would loom across sectors, UJ's messaging was important in that it focused on shaving off frills and recurring expenditure with reassurances that no jobs would be lost.

The decision to shift to ERT was predicated on the principle of equitable access, a paradoxical position given the fact that UJ had no control over the personal social spaces or circumstances that students found themselves in during the lockdown periods. How then did the institution pursue its social justice and equity principles, given the new challenges which provoked and exacerbated the already precarious circumstances in which many students found themselves during the pandemic? Bozalek and Carolissen (2014:16) argue for the need to 'create opportunities for people to participate on an equal footing' which aptly captures the dilemma that faced the university. It is precisely this recognition of inequitable access that underpinned the UJ response. Whilst students had accessed higher education in terms of enrolment as shown above, the pandemic created new hurdles for continued access to teaching and learning. These new barriers to access required a differentiated response.

To this end, while much has been written about the digital divide, bandwidth, data costs, and so on, there was also a widespread pandemic anxiety. The university recognised this anxiety as being pervasive, and through communication channels offered psychological support alongside concrete resources. There was a recognition that many of the students were vulnerable due to a host of psychosocial issues, and there was a strong focus on addressing these problems individually, where possible, or collectively. The intermediary for accessing knowledge is the LMS or any other modality that could be used by the academics and/or students at UJ but accessing the LMS proved to be a near insurmountable barrier in terms of obtaining access to the knowledge that was needed for some students. Once this has been resolved or in some way ameliorated, the resolution of this issue did not necessarily alleviate the stringencies of others. Along with the decision to continue teaching and learning, decisions had to be made to partner with private sector service providers for data and device provision. This required a substantial investment and redirection of resources, both financial and human, by the university. UJ did not wait for government directions to commence with dispersing laptops and devices. This initiative had already commenced in previous years and was ratcheted up as the need rose during the pandemic. The provision of data and devices is not the core business of a university but was recognised as a significant barrier to the continuation of the academic year (UJ 2020).

For the university, the decision to shift to ERT was unavoidable, as the alternative was the loss of the academic year with subsequent consequences for the sustainability of the higher education system and unimaginable ramifications for the economy and society. The socio-economic impact of the loss of the year would reverberate through the country, creating enormous pressure, resulting in a massively bloated higher education system. This is specifically true because in such a situation, new entrants would overlap with

those who are already in the system who would have 'lost' a year, creating an extraordinarily complex set of demands on staffing, enrolment plans, and the overall resource capacity of the university. Such a situation would not be sustainable for the financial viability of the university and the potential loss of subsidy and tuition fees, should the academic year not be completed. More broadly, the impact on prospective graduates and their employers would also have been disastrous, creating, for example a vacuum in the provision of newly qualified professionals to a variety of sectors and workplaces, like teachers, nurses, and engineers, to name but a few.

It was evident that the logic as described above could only lead to the strategic decision to cascade ERT, to mitigate risks, and to address gaps as they emerged. Rutter, Wolpert, and Greenhalgh (2020) indeed suggest that 'viable clumsy solutions' are essential to develop a sound evidence base and test out assumptions and ideas in real-world settings under conditions of crisis. They argue that information under these crisis conditions is often incomplete, uncertain, or sparse, meaning that solutions will often be imperfect and require constant interrogation and reconfiguration – but that action is often unavoidable.

In the space of less than three weeks from 24 March 2020 to the resumption of learning online on 20 April 2020, the university would make momentous decisions, all focused on achieving the core objective of 'no student left behind' (Motala & Menon 2020). These decisions include the following:

- Revising the academic calendar to provide the necessary flexibility.
- Instituting internal governance processes for managing curriculum changes in modules at faculty/college level.
- Provision of support for academics reviewing modules and creating a Bb presence.
- Establishing a COVID-19 Coordination Committee.
- Holding weekly meetings of the Management Executive Academic Committee and similarly at all levels of management.
- Creating a COVID-19 website with sections pertaining to teaching remotely, learning remotely, working remotely, and health and wellbeing. These sections were expanded as the year progressed to include statistics and valuable information and resources pertinent to gender-based violence.
- Proactively recognising and managing cybersecurity challenges.

Table 1 provides an illustrative snapshot of decisions that were taken and their pathways through the university structures. The table presents a matrix of examples of decisions that were made at executive level and cascades their impact on actions and subsequent decisions which were needed at each succeeding level in the university. Clearly, the table cannot fully capture

Table 1: Matrix of examples of decisions

Responsible body	Types of decisions	About	Teaching and learning	Facilities and resources	Monitoring and evaluation
Executive leadership	Strategic decisions	Teaching and learning to go online	Work/study remotely vs provision for residential students unable to go home	Provision of data and devices (staff and students)	Reporting, monitoring, and governance into internal and external structures
Faculty and division-level	Tactical decisions	Review all modules to ensure Bb presence	HR implications equipment/ access to systems; communications with staff and students	Reprioritise budget; assess device and data needs; alternatives to Bb where needed	Detailed reporting and oversight on specific areas of operations, e.g., student Bb participation data; assessment modifications, etc.
Academic and Support Departments	Operational decisions	All aspects of online delivery addressed	Establish mechanisms for support to enable students: Staff interactions; outline implications for WIL, practical learning, etc.; reconfigure all assessments; adjust all work-flow to meet online/off-campus demands	Delivery of devices and data packages to students/staff; schedule and implement online timetable; determine synchronous/ asynchronous balance and alternative routes	Monitor student activities online; support student wellness; manage staff workloads, online operations, and staff wellness
Individual staff members and students	How to continue T&L	Tools and techniques are needed	Where and how achieved?	Context-dependent	Feedback and support/ helplines

the complexity of decision-making and implementation in each case, but it provides a sense of the sequencing of events that were needed to ensure the implementation of ERT.

Table 1 demonstrates that individual members of the university community were able to participate in the process of devising meaningful responses to the COVID-19 crisis by cooperating with one another, alerting management and other structures to concerns and difficulties, continuously engaging with the students, and feeding the results of this back to the structures. The management and leadership skills which were evident at all levels of the university, showed a deep responsiveness and willingness to collaborate in the resolution of the problems which they had to face, like further entrenchment, with a culture of care and compassion across the university.

Successful leadership requires communication, care, and compassion, all three of which were evident not only in the individual responses to the pandemic at UJ, but across the institution's culture and practices. Meetings were used to collaborate, navigate, and consider matters at hand, enabling an information flow in multiple directions. Regular communication with staff and students was a channel to ensure proximity, create a community, albeit virtual, and provide information. This included the establishment of a COVID-19 portal with resources for staff, postdoctoral research fellows, and students. To 'steady the boat' through the uncertain waters of the unfolding pandemic, collaboration, communication, and responsive, ongoing organisation were essential to the crisis leadership strategies which were deployed at different managerial levels.

Pedagogical Intent and Approach

Globally, higher education institutions were faced with the mammoth challenge of transitioning their operations from contact delivery to online and blended alternatives in a rapidly unfolding pandemic (Cutri, Mena, & Whiting 2020; Peters, Rizvi, McCulloch, Gibbs, Gorur, Hong, Hwang, Zipin, Brennan, Robertson, Quay, Malbon, Taglietti, Barnett, Chengbing, McLaren, Apple, Papastephanou, Burbules, Jackson, Jalote, Kalantzis, Cope, Fataar, Conroy, Misiaszek, Biesta, Jandrić, Choo, Apple, Stone, Tierney, Tesar, Besley, & Misiaszek 2020). In South Africa, these efforts were sharply undercut by the heterogenous existing capacity and resourcing across institutions, as well as the variable contexts in which they were found. The South African legacy of apartheid has created fissures and an uneven higher education sector. The pandemic placed the same demand on a highly stratified sector, requiring it to embark on a massive pivot to online learning without the required time to appropriately sequence the steps which were required to support such an initiative. Curriculum development under ERT can be described as

haphazard and reactive, focusing on ensuring that the academic year would be saved, and learning could continue (O'Keefe, Rafferty, Gunder, & Vignare 2020). There was little time at the start of the transition to act deliberatively with due consideration of the pedagogical intent and approach that were needed. However, at UJ the academic structures and systems were put in place to consider changes to curricula with support which was provided for online teaching. It is noteworthy that conversations about curricula, rules of progression and combination, and the need to shift to a blended approach began a few years earlier. These proved useful in that it allowed for a smoother transition. An intense and concentrated period ensued with skilling and reskilling of both staff and students to contend with the shift to ERT.

Whilst the terminology that was used to describe this transition is quite strident, it encapsulates the experience of the head-on and rapid change to online learning in the early days of the pandemic. In hindsight, the weeks turned to months and, with the commencement of a new academic year in 2021, greater consideration of the pedagogy underpinning the curriculum was both possible and actively sought. Lessons learned from transitioning the existing courses and modules to ERT, include that effective curriculum design is essential to providing a robust experience to students in alternative teaching and learning modalities (Rambe & Moeti 2017; Motala & Menon 2020). By the end of 2020, as the university contemplated a new academic year, UJ carefully crafted a richer hybrid model of teaching and learning, based on the principles of physical distancing, requirements of the curriculum, and explorations of other modalities of teaching and learning. It is no longer assumed that existing modules can be seamlessly transposed into an online or hybrid space, given the challenges posed by technological accessibility, factors affecting student engagement and participation, and the limitations imposed in the cause of navigating a learning space that is still unfamiliar to most faculty and students. It is also important to recall the point which was made by Skulmowski and Rey (2020), that technology usage needs to be responsive, educational, contextually sensitive, and not merely about making learning 'entertaining.' In South Africa, context sensitivity is particularly poignant, given the distorted disparities in the student population.

Collaboration and Internationalisation

Arnove (2020) argues that universities will need to grapple with internationalisation in the context of reduced international mobility and new interventions in online and hybrid learning that break down geographical distances through technology. One example of this can be found in Hilli, Nørgård, and Aaen (2019), where a co-teaching programme was introduced between a Danish and a Finnish university in a course on educational design and digitisation. Students at both universities enrolled for the same course,

using platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and WordPress to support their learning, and were taught by lecturers from both institutions (Hilli *et al.* 2019).

Joint online offerings are one strategy that Arnove (2020) advocates for, recognising that the COVID-19 pandemic presents a new opportunity for institutions around the world to connect lecturers and students through shared teaching, debates, and virtual sessions, as well as cultivating global networks to support local outreach and community engagement. Using a variety of online platforms, UJ's international staff and students were supported despite the curtailment of movement during the lockdown levels. Virtual town hall meetings were held with international students to bring them into a cohesive communal space whilst assessing their teaching and learning needs. Arnove (2020) suggests that such strategies signal a shift away from internationalisation-as-mobility or as the cultivation of new consumer markets in higher education towards internationalising the learning experience at the level of curriculum and practice.

This section has described some of the engagement and decision-making processes that unfolded at UJ during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, while offering some examples of how pedagogy, teaching, and learning unfolded. The UJ QA Report (UJ 2020) offers a wealth of insight into the 'nuts and bolts' of the institution's response to the pandemic, identifying the challenges that were faced by staff, students, and other stakeholders, as well as their impressions of the pivot to ERT. The following section frames these insights in terms of lessons or principles to support effective crisis leadership in higher education.

Steering and Rowing

The approach taken to managing the pandemic at UJ, offers several principles that can guide institutions and university leaders in developing their own response to a crisis, by building responsiveness and resilience into the everyday operations of institutions.

For one, the ever-growing digitisation and internationalisation of global economies and knowledge communities place universities under an increasing pressure to *develop an online and hybrid learning capacity*, as well as the support systems which are required to enable consistent, equitable, and comprehensive access and participation. The UJ case argues that keeping one step ahead of the game during 'normal' times, especially in relation to embracing innovative teaching and learning practices, was leveraged during the pandemic. Moreover, the support systems within a university must be informed by a commitment to *bridge the digital divide*, which would look different in different settings: Some institutions may have the capacity to offer

laptops, others may, with limited resources, only be able to provide tablets or smartphones. While these inequalities require urgent and more systemic solutions, working with the limitations that it creates, also shapes the design process that is required to build an online learning capacity because, following Skulmowski and Rey (2020), technology usage must be responsive and adapted to context in order to positively impact teaching and learning.

Menon and Castrillón (2019:7) argue that what universities need to change is how the 'development of skills may be achieved through curricula that are designed to enable learning and how these skills may be appropriated for multiple uses, flexibly, and readily extrapolated to diverse, future, and perhaps even unknown, contexts.' In a time of crisis, through its reflexive and flexible management practices, the university was able to respond to and create environments and experiences that, in line with the changing role and purpose of higher education, allow students 'to discover and construct knowledge for themselves' (Barr & Tagg 1995:5).

At UJ, during the COVID-19 pandemic, students became members of online communities in which they were able to discover aspects of themselves and their learning, as they worked alongside their lecturers to solve learning problems. The innovation of staff during the transition was showcased and celebrated. Given the likely emergence of new careers and the prospective technological developments of the 4IR alongside the demands of the pandemic, these are critical skills, the achievement of which is due in part to how the university understood the needs and imperatives of the new conceptual framework, underpinned by principles of hybrid learning. Clearly, while barriers to access persist, universities have a window of opportunity to leverage learnings from the pandemic and hone, and finesse it for the 4IR.

Conclusion: Reaching Open Water

Dealing with today and planning for tomorrow underpinned the UJ response to the pandemic, highlighting the importance of *building and deploying middle-management capacity* to be agile and capable of delivering quick, workable responses to emergent issues while also designing more thoughtful long-term solutions. Harnessing this wealth of talent, contributed to the response of the university with the required agility.

An important lesson from the UJ case is the recognition that leadership resides at all levels and is not exclusive to senior management. Concentrating decision-making at the top would only have slowed the process of managing the unfolding crisis, highlighting the need for institutions to become more collaborative and communicative in their daily operations, in order to build the kind of relationships and networks that can effectively coordinate under challenging and often unprecedented conditions. Finally, given the increasing

pressure being placed on higher education funding and fee payments, *transparency in 'balancing the books'* is essential to create an institution-level trust, not only for the students but also for the staff who had their own concerns around work security and potential job losses or salary cuts, while teaching, learning, and research continue to be the core function of universities. This will always be contingent on successfully managing, communicating, and resolving the 'bread-and-butter' issues that confront the university community, especially in times of crisis.

Crisis leadership is a concept that has grown in relevance for the management of higher education institutions, as internal contestations around access, resourcing, and epistemic justice coincide with external social, economic, and political currents. Leading in times of crisis goes beyond managing the event and its immediate fallout; it requires a sensitive handling of relationships, identifying and pursuing a long-term vision that appropriately responds to the gaps or tensions illuminated by the crisis, and ensuring that effective planning and monitoring are in place to deal with future events. Crises are unpredictable. It affects a wide variety of stakeholders and threatens to destabilise the operation of the organisation and its ability to deliver on its core mandate. Flexibility, responsiveness, and collaboration are more likely to deliver desired outcomes than a rigid adherence to existing policies, frameworks, and procedures that may not work in an unfolding crisis. In the context of the crisis, the regulatory and policy frameworks within the university environment were amended to be fit for purpose to achieve quality outcomes in the decisions that were made. These are some of the prescripts that the leadership at UJ followed in full recognition that this was a global crisis and that the purpose was to ensure the continuity of the academic year to create as equivalent a teaching and learning experience as contact teaching. With FMF there was a level of predictability, whereas with the pandemic the uncertainties were rife, required decision-making, and had to be pre-emptive. The only certainty was that the uncertainties were numerous and would evolve and change.

By 2021, the lessons that we have learned during the early days of the pandemic have stood the university in good stead as it now navigates new ground with a hybrid teaching model in line with the prescripts ascribed to this period of the pandemic. More importantly, whilst teaching and learning were priorities, the university continued its pursuit in terms of research, rankings, community engagement, and exploring collaborations and partnerships. The recognition that this model poses, challenges to epistemic access and cognitive justice, remains a constant concern. What the university has not lost sight of is the co-existence of the pandemic and the 4IR, and these factors have been taken into account as we navigate a brave new world. The university does not exist in a bubble, and while it charts a new course in this crisis, it also

has to grapple with its location in a society beset by a dire economic recession, shrinking resources, and a grinding inequality.

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