What South Africa’s universities have learnt about the future from Covid-19

Mail & Guardian February 26 - 4 March 2021

The Covid-19 pandemic put unprecedented stress on students across the country. Campuses that had been hubs of learning for decades were empty. Universities had to find ways to continue while not leaving anyone behind. With thousands of students of diverse backgrounds and means at each institution, this was no easy feat. Administration, staff and students scrambled to find ways to adapt.

More than 90% of students enrolled in the featured universities in this article participated in online learning in 2020, using a dazzling array of technologies. Covid-19 forced South African universities to take a sudden leap into the future.

Universities introduced emergency remote learning (ERL). Lecturers were game, but many lacked the key skills for digital teaching. Students weren’t always “digital natives”. While many were adept at using social media, they lacked digital competencies, from using Microsoft Office to writing emails. To work, ERL had to be student-centred, adaptive, evidence-based and scaled. Pre-Covid-19, universities had begun moving towards a blended model as several had launched massive open online courses.

Lecturers were encouraged to record their classes (with up to 60% uptake pre-Covid-19 at some universities) through automated video-recording venues.

Building on this basis, courses were offered over learning platforms, with a variety of supporting resources and services, which used analytics to improve efficacy with data derived from regular surveys of staff and students.

It is now clear that the “emergency responses” showcase an evolution of education, requiring new techniques, habits and interactions between students and lecturers. Blended learning, according to the panel, will become the “new normal” reality for universities. The findings are that, on balance, it’s more work, not less.

There were improvements over in-person learning. Synchronous attendance went up. Asynchronous availability of lectures and materials helped many students, including those who are first-generation university-goers or second-language English speakers. Results improved on average. Students appreciated additional online support and direct contact from lecturers — often through social media platforms.

However, assessment remains a challenging area, given the difficulty in disentangling the causes of improved performance. Was learning more intensive online? Were there fewer distractions? Was there some cheating? Universities had reservations about giving online exams and assessments in a digital format. There is
still work required to ensure that all content is appropriately covered and tested without the possibility of irregularities.

Universities aimed for universal digital access for students, and largely succeeded; however, for students in remote areas, device access, electricity, water, conducive work spaces and high data costs were a significant constraint to access their courses, support and learning resources. In response, universities made large-scale data purchases for all students, identified digitally excluded students and provided devices. The University of Fort Hare, for example, purchased 6 800 laptops worth R40-million for students who did not have their own.

It became clear that, like the rest of society, universities are dependent on universal affordable broadband access — a national priority that still eludes us. Device access, digital literacy, infrastructure and systems are now an absolute necessity for education.

Now that students can log in from anywhere, universities across the globe will compete vigorously for students. Larger institutions with good brands and high rankings have an edge. Those with unique offerings can also thrive. A point was made about South Africa’s global leadership in the study of infectious diseases, oceanography, and other subjects such as decolonisation. This suggests one future strategy: increased localisation and specialisation of content — differentiation, not assimilation. Another is collaboration. This has expanded through, for example, the EU collaborative online international learning project.

South African universities can better leverage local knowledge and expertise in a global, interconnected world. Internationalisation, both inbound and outbound, is increasingly viewed as the way forward.

For all this opportunity, financing shortfalls loom large and online learning is not necessarily cheaper than traditional models. Increased investment is required in staff upskilling, training, equipment and infrastructure. Larger universities may be able to afford these costs but smaller ones may struggle.

With less money to fund studies as a result of the economic disruption of Covid-19, many young people are contemplating studying part-time. With the campus-based university model at risk, universities are looking into partnerships with the private sector to expand enrolment through hybrid online degrees that allow students to work and study simultaneously with some campus contact. This unlocks new forms of financing for education through the private sector as the gap between structured education, practical skills and work becomes smaller.

The residential universities have had a sustained experiment in remote learning thrust upon them by Covid-19. Some had already piloted blended models but Covid-19 forced all to consider radically expanding the scope and pace of this process.

What the new university model might look like is uncertain, and many variants
thereof are likely. Even when the digital access barrier — devices, data, connectivity, digital skills and digital literacy — is overcome, the question of the best institutional and learning models still needs to be answered. Tradition, status quo and self-interest are unreliable guides in this time. South Africa would be wise to offer its universities the support and flexibility to attempt new and diverse approaches.

The Motsepe Foundation sessions Online Learning: What Works & What Doesn’t were facilitated by Professor Brian Armstrong, chair of digital business at the Wits Business School, with professors from the following universities: Mamokgethi Phakeng from Cape Town, Francois Strydom from the Free State, Zeblon Vilakazi from Wits, Tawana Kupe from Pretoria, Sakhela Buhlungu from Fort Hare and Wim de Villiers from Stellenbosch