

Pandemic Leadership in Higher Education: New Horizons, Risks and Complexities

Kirti Menon

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8831-8643>
University of Johannesburg,
South Africa
kirtim@uj.ac.za

Shireen Motala

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1341-7019>
University of Johannesburg,
South Africa
kirtim@uj.ac.za

Abstract

The disruption of the academic year by the COVID-19 pandemic required higher education institutions to manage and lead under untenable conditions. This article is a case study of a leadership model adopted at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) located in South Africa. It offers insights into how the leadership and governance evolved and enabled management of the crisis presented by the pandemic. This article presents the relevant theory and concepts on leadership followed by a review of the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. This is followed by an interpretation of the sequence of events as they unfolded at UJ propelled by the mandate to leave no student behind and continue with the academic year. The UJ experience was characterised by the values of social justice, equity, access and teaching excellence. This article explores the University of Johannesburg's response in relation to these values and leadership theories.

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



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Introduction

The new academic year in South Africa had just commenced when the country was placed under complete lockdown in March 2020. With a mere six weeks of teaching and learning time completed, universities across the country closed doors in line with the prescripts of the National Disaster Act. South Africa, like the rest of the world, was facing a disaster in the form of a highly unpredictable, infectious and potentially fatal disease. The country soon found itself in a state of flux as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted society and the economy at an unprecedented rate. It would take more than a few months before cautious moves to “reopen” the country would occur. Steven Soderbergh’s gripping film *Contagion*,¹ from 2011, portrays the race to beat a pandemic and the chaotic social order that ensues. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has mirrored the film as systems have adapted to the clichéd “new normal”.

After a few days into a hard lockdown the gap between fiction and reality dissipated, and a realisation dawned that nothing would be the same again. For higher education, the deserted campuses and empty lecture halls were eerily haunting. Plans were soon afoot to ensure that the missive “no student should be left behind” would be met with a responsive and agile reimagining of teaching and learning, one that was conscious of the deep inequities within our society and how this would impact the educational experience. A call was issued by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to rapidly move to online learning or to make alternative arrangements to avoid a total disruption of the academic year.

As the pandemic engulfed the country, a crisis developed around the management and planning required to continue teaching, learning, research and other core functions of the university amid a challenging context. Can it be argued that universities were well equipped for this, having had recent prior experience coping with a crisis? At the height of #FeesMustFall, for example, the University of Cape Town (UCT), like others affected by the protests, switched to online teaching. Given this albeit limited track record, the following question arose: What can a university leadership do to ride the crisis and anticipate a future that is unpredictable?

This article presents a case study of how the leadership and governance at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) “enabled” the management of the COVID-19 crisis. It uses the approach presented by Fernandez and Shaw (2020), which highlights three of the leadership best practices relevant to presenting the UJ case: 1) servant leadership that emphasises empowerment, involvement, and collaboration of academic leaders; 2) distributive leadership with leadership responsibilities distributed to a network of teams throughout the organisation to improve the quality of the decisions made in crisis resolution; and 3) communicative leadership, actualised through a variety of mutual communication channels to all stakeholders.

¹ View the official trailer for the film at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sYSyuuLk5g>.

This article includes a critical assessment on how UJ fared in relation to this model. The article presents the relevant theory and concepts on leadership and a discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. This leads into a discussion of the UJ case, management and leadership during COVID-19, followed by concluding comments. This is a case study with a specific focus on UJ, drawing on qualitative research methods to generate information rich in detail and embedded in context. The intention is to unpack the leadership and management within the university in order to extrapolate the significance for the higher education sector in particular. The added value here is that as participant observers with a vested interest, the researchers were intrinsically involved at a senior management level during the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. This proximity provided a vantage point from which to explain, describe and explore the approach adopted within the university to manage the core functions notwithstanding the pandemic and lockdown constraints. The lapse of time since the event has been long enough to allow for sufficient distance to critically reflect.

The research proceeds using the approach espoused by Merriam that “the case as a phenomenon of some sort [occurs] in a bounded context” (Merriam 1998, 27). By defining the parameters of the research to UJ, the case study focuses on a specific context within which particular practices and interventions occurred. Utilising leadership and management theory enables one to understand and reflect on the practices enacted within a public higher education institution navigating the vagaries of the pandemic and its resultant impact on higher education. The research draws on a critical realist philosophy, seeking to identify and understand the underlying conditions by which a particular phenomenon works or does not work. Taking a historical and structural view of the process by which the pandemic response unfolded provides the opportunity to deliver a nuanced picture of the forces that shaped, enabled and constrained it (Patomäki and Wight 2000). This case study is informed by the researchers’ participation in high-level management processes, decisions made within the university and research conducted for quality assurance (UJ 2020) during the period under review.

Managing Crises

South African universities have long had a fraught history of crisis management. For instance, during apartheid as student protests gripped the nation, there was little attempt to recover the academic year for protesters. In more recent history, Jansen and Walters (2019, 24) refer to the period after #FeesMustFall as a time of “uneasy stability” in universities. As universities serve as microcosms of our society, this uneasy stability resonates with the current political climate in South Africa, plagued as it is by extreme inequalities, high unemployment rates and persistent poverty.

South Africa inherited a post-apartheid higher education landscape characterised by inequity at all levels. The unequal distribution of resources and capacity, deliberate underfunding of black universities and technikons, and significant duplication and wastage led to the post-apartheid government undertaking a process of institutional

reform geared towards developing a unified, rational higher education system (Badat 2009; CHE 2007). However, while these reforms intended to expand access and facilitate transformation in the system by merging and reconfiguring existing higher education institutions, they were undercut by reduced government expenditure, which drove up user fees at universities. Because historically white universities had the existing infrastructure, reserves and networks that allowed for greater access to resources, historically black and newly formed comprehensive universities tended to lag behind and be far more dependent on state subsidies than their wealthier counterparts (Motala 2020). This differentiation influenced the ability of institutions to deal with the new set of demands that COVID-19 placed.

What emerges in the work of Jansen (2017), Habib (2019), Lawton-Misra (2019) and others (Badat 2016; CSVr 2017; Mavunga 2019) is that university leaders largely resorted to a crisis management approach in 2015 during #FeesMustFall, when the student movement was still emergent and relatively unpredictable in its course of action. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 context, key concerns were to ensure that the academic year could be salvaged, and exams could be written in 2020. As Lawton-Misra (2019, 121) writing on the #FeesMustFall protests states, “[f]rom 2016, [university leaders] worked collaboratively as a team to share information of their individual experiences on their campuses, of how they were managing certain scenarios, about what they believed would be the most appropriate response for the system, and ultimately demanding a national response from DHET”. What is clear is that features of the COVID-19 phase have included improved communication and collaboration across institutions, and with the DHET.

As with every sphere of society, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the ways in which universities function, which has had a cascading influence on leadership responsibilities and obligations across faculties/departments and has required leaders to have immediate responses (Gigliotti 2020 as cited in Jappie et al. 2020, 5). In order to curb the spread of COVID-19 by measures such as maintaining social distancing, universities, like other education institutions, responded by cancelling contact learning and teaching “and moving to emergency remote teaching” (Jappie et al. 2020, 4). Social distancing can be regarded as one of the hallmarks of 2020 and a mode of social interaction that subverts how public universities in South Africa (and elsewhere) have been operating. Unsurprisingly, the impact of the pandemic can be observed in higher education, and as Jappie et al. (2020, 4) note, “this [COVID-19 pandemic] crisis represents an unprecedented occasion for higher education to evaluate its preparedness for new changes”. In a survey conducted within universities between March and April 2020 by the International Association of Universities (IAU), based at UNESCO, almost all the 424 institutions that responded from around the world had been affected by the pandemic (Marinoni, Van’t Land, and Jensen 2020, 11).

Arguably, the most apparent impact on higher education has been in the arena of digital and online technological use. The trajectory of online, remote and virtual learning and

teaching has undergone exponential shifts during the coronavirus pandemic. However, within this context, digital inequality has been raised as an acute challenge in South Africa, where the digital divide remains stark across all segments of society.

As the lockdown unfolded, UJ had to adjust its strategy based on the variables at play. A COVID-19 Coordinating Committee was established, with priorities in the beginning including ensuring campuses were secure and residences vacated barring some international students, devising protocols in line with health and safety regulations and ensuring that staff had the required equipment to continue working remotely.

The staggered transition of the various higher education institutions to online or remote learning could be reflective of the governance, leadership and management capabilities of different institutions. UJ, UCT and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) had started by April, while the University of Pretoria (UP) and the University of the Free State (UFS) started in May, and others started later. A significant number of universities simply did not have the required infrastructure to kickstart remote teaching immediately. This created delays and a differentiated response to the pandemic. There have been claims that the vulnerable have not been taken into consideration sufficiently within the higher education system in this shift (Jappie et al. 2020, 6). The following case study of UJ, however, will demonstrate that the foregrounding of the unequal contexts of students informed and shaped responses constantly and at great cost.

The UJ Case—Management and Leadership during COVID-19

The management of the COVID-19 pandemic resided at different governance levels, national, provincial and institutional. As government issued regulations pertaining to the lockdown and set the legal framework for the response to COVID-19, the DHET had a role to play in outlining the specific parameters for higher education institutions to plan. This was done in consultation with Universities South Africa (USAf), the Council on Higher Education (CHE), and other stakeholders that formed part of a COVID-19 task team led by Deputy Minister Buti Manamela. A well-coordinated response to the virus as a post-secondary education and training (PSET) sector was formulated. This began with an announcement of closures of higher education institutions and an issuance of caution for students who remained in residences. This was later followed by regulations issued to manage the different levels of lockdown (Manamela 2020).

At the same time, the DHET took stock of the landscape by requesting all institutions to complete an updated survey on their information technology (IT) capability for offering online learning, which was viewed as an enabler for resuming the academic year online or through a delivery of printed material. A DHET Communique on 17 March 2020 signalled the urgency required for the sector to “identify and explore digital and online methodologies for teaching and learning that may need to be put in place to support the academic programme at a later stage”. On 17 April 2020, the CHE sent out a communique to Deputy Vice-Chancellors (DVCs) Academics: Teaching and Learning

at Public Higher Education Institutions and Heads Academic: Teaching and Learning at Private Higher Education Institutions in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The CHE commended the proactive initiatives at individual institutions in addressing the current national and global crisis. The following two critical points were noted:

- Institutions needed to establish which of their programmes were affected.
- For students with service learning, practical, work-integrated learning (WIL), internship and related requirements, the CHE urged the statutory and non-statutory bodies to approach these with flexibility so that the registration requirements were revised to prevent prejudice to graduating students in particular who were affected by circumstances beyond their control. The CHE recommended this to all the relevant professional bodies. Institutions were urged to make practical proposals to the professional bodies on alternative means of addressing the prescribed requirements, and to share these in the sector so that there would be consistency between the sector and the approach taken by each of the professional bodies.

This communication further lifted the restrictions on all programmes accredited for contact delivery. All programmes accredited by the CHE for contact could be offered, supported and assessed through virtual and online delivery and blended learning approaches.

UJ commenced its online teaching in April 2020. The timing of the lockdown prior the March/April 2020 term break required the university to be galvanised into crisis management at high speed (Motala and Menon 2020). This was no easy task. A series of steps was taken both sequentially and in tandem to ensure that the university was ready to deal with the closure of campuses on the one hand, and the complex series of actions required to transition to remote teaching and learning on the other hand. The immediate issues that came to the fore were equity, access and reach relating to the availability of data for all students and staff, and reskilling staff to meet the new ways of learning. The newly established COVID-19 Coordinating Committee referred to above met weekly, along with the Management Executive Committee Academic (MECA), which met weekly, and the Management Executive Committee (MEC) of the university, which met daily.

UJ has more than 50,000 students, with approximately 41,000 undergraduate students and 9,000 postgraduate students spread across four campuses and across eight faculties and one college. The leadership and management of the tasks that required immediate attention were indicative of distributive leadership. Throughout the university, new committee structures were assembled across support structures and within faculties, as well as cascading down to departments. In an unprecedented manner, support structures and academic structures engaged in committees together for the common purpose that unified the university community in its resolve to ensure that no student was left behind. Among staff there were real concerns around job losses, possible retrenchments, and

whether the new way of doing things would lead to redundancies, especially in the name of a new managerialism and increased reliance on technology. Working from home was a new requirement facing the constraints of uneven bandwidth in certain areas, and family responsibilities along with the ongoing tensions precipitated by the pandemic. The turnaround time from the commencement of lockdown to establishing the sequence of steps for the continuation of the academic year remotely was just under a fortnight. None of the decisions that informed the shift to remote teaching and learning were made uncritically, as the socio-economic reality of students' living conditions, contexts, access to devices, data, bandwidth and appropriate workspaces loomed large as very real barriers. There were areas within the university's control, but others such as poverty, inequality and social class were beyond the capacity of the institution. The alternative to these hard decisions would be to do nothing and increase the burden on students by delaying the academic year.

One of the features of the UJ response was a rejection of a hierarchical model in terms of assessing the landscape, evaluating the options and selecting the course of actions. Initially the process felt "top-down", with decisions being made higher up and others having to implement them. Also there seemed to be a surveillance mechanism, with academics being called to account for the levels of participation in their classes. The UJ leadership mitigated these perceptions with genuine intent to ensure that academics, support staff, management and students were at the discussion table. The usage of cross-functional teams, for example, to evaluate the state of readiness for university modules to be translated into the online mode, enabled a quick response but one that was examined from multiple angles. What was apparent was that there was insufficient time for reflection, and that the coordination of the university's response had to be quick, taking into account the extenuating factors prompted by the pandemic.

What was immediately apparent was that universities have a broader mandate than just teaching and learning. The primary task at one level was to establish a culture of trust, collaboration, and shared leadership. This was easier said than done. UJ rapidly established governance structures with the purpose of steering all activities and to consider the evolving situation. As described by Motala and Menon (2020, 86):

The lockdown took place just before the March/April 2020 university break and, overnight, the entire complex organisation of the university was on high alert. Leave arrangements were cancelled, a COVID Coordinating Committee was established that met weekly and, together with the Management Executive Committee Academic (MECA), planned the shift to remote teaching and learning. For an institution with 50,000 students, this was a mammoth task. In the leadership of this were members of the Management Executive Committee, the most senior leadership group in the institution. Committees were replicated across all support structures and within faculties.

A feature of the leadership and management of the university during this period was that right from the onset all domains were represented in committee structures. This

encouraged a coherent and integrated approach and while the focus was on teaching and learning, other equally important matters had to be considered. While initially this appeared top-down and prescriptive, through the network of committee structures and a free flow of information the university community began to be bound by a common purpose. A series of detailed memos and circulars began to “inform” students and staff about what needed to be done, primarily not to lose the academic year. There were helplines to support students and the opportunity for direct engagement with queries contributed to a pedagogy of care.

This decisiveness translated into an activation of all structures within the university with a focus on ensuring that teaching and learning continued. As the complex set of committee structures emerged vertically and horizontally, communication flows improved. There was strict accountability at all levels of the institution, with the leadership primarily responsible and accountable for the continuation of the academic programme. The combination of decision-making with feedback loops both vertically and horizontally ensured that the flow of information within the university was sufficiently robust to enable a scanning and assessment of signals that would require action. The speed at which events unfolded required quick top-down decisions that were contrary to the collaborative decision-making models that characterise universities. There were challenges throughout.

The negotiations about the availability of data with the large providers took longer than expected, creating student anxiety; the distribution of computers and devices to far-flung rural areas relied on a faltering post-office system; international students who were in the country but had not finalised their visas could not enrol; the mental health and wellbeing especially of staff who felt overstretched and on call night and day was a reality. The availability of data coverage was better at night, and some staff chose to work the “night shift”. The ravaging effects of the pandemic took a toll on family and professional life, as staff tried to balance these differing demands. In the midst of this, a robust discussion took place on performance management and how assessment would take place when there was nothing “normal” about working conditions.

The UJ leadership was alert to these issues. UJ demonstrated notable characteristics of the three leadership best practices in its management of the transition to emergency response teaching (ERT) during the COVID-19 crisis. At the beginning of the lockdown, rapid decisions were made by senior management. As the situation evolved and management structures were put into place, more consultation took place. An ethos of servant leadership permeated the institution’s commitment to rescue the academic year for all students, underpinned by dependence on distributed leadership to effectively diffuse responsibility through organisational channels. This occurred while ensuring ongoing communication and clarity of purpose with stakeholders, securing the necessary buy-in to deliver on the institution’s mandate.

Leadership Theory and Concepts in Practice

The research derives from a framework of crisis leadership recognising the dimensions that determine success and applying these to the university's context. Crisis leadership is a concept that has grown in relevance to the management of higher education institutions, as internal contestations around access, resourcing and epistemic justice coincide with external social, economic and political currents. Crises are unpredictable, affect a wide variety of stakeholders and threaten to destabilise the operation of the organisation and its ability to deliver on its core mandate. In this case, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a challenge to leadership globally, as the pandemic created circumstances beyond ordinary government control. Flexibility, responsiveness and collaboration were more likely to deliver desired outcomes as opposed to rigid adherence. Using the lens of crisis leadership, what is explored and described in this section is the response of UJ to the crisis.

The first decision that the leadership had to make was to move decisively to online learning, which required radical changes in attitude, values, and beliefs for some stakeholders, including academics and students (Heifetz and Laurie 2001). At UJ, planning was grounded on a threshold of pre-COVID-19 experiences in blended learning, although this was not consistently applied or used across institutions. At UJ it required changes and enhancements to the technological infrastructure, which was to some extent primed and optimal for online teaching, but not necessarily for remote teaching and learning. The shift to a new shared leadership model was not immediate, and initial perceptions were of a top-down hierarchical approach with decisions made by senior leadership and implemented by middle management. As representative structures were put in place, deans for example slowly assumed increased direct responsibility for the effective delivery of the curriculum, more voices began to be heard, and more delegated responsibility took place, a form of distributed leadership. This was then replicated at the faculty level, with vice or assistant deans and heads of departments assuming greater responsibility. The complexity of the rapid transition to online learning placed enormous pressure on academics and support staff who themselves were grappling with remote working and having to embrace the online mode without the requisite skills or time to have a considered pedagogical orientation. These struggles were not visible and apparent to management. As Kezar and Holcombe (2017) note, institutions operating a shared leadership model have benefitted from a greater degree of agility and innovation than those with an authoritarian approach. This agility was not immediately visible at UJ. Moreover, as a merged institution, UJ displays elements of a formal traditional culture, meaning that internal shifts were required in order to adapt to new leadership and delegation strategies. A distributed leadership style encourages collaboration and inclusivity and, according to long-established leadership theory (Kerr and Jermier 1978), works well in academia where followers are experienced, knowledgeable and intrinsically motivated. At UJ, many academics had not utilised online approaches in their teaching and learning, and there was resistance and disquiet about rapid change and the instruction rather than the request to do things

differently. The pandemic had thrown several curveballs and this in turn created discomfort that existed in tension with the directive from management to continue academic business in an entirely new and uncharted terrain. The trauma of the university community during this pandemic is an area that requires further research and should not be discounted in any narrative of the management of the crisis.

Strielkowski and Wang (2020, 3), reflecting on the Asian case, argue that there has been a paucity of leadership demonstrated in the manner in which institutions have responded to the pandemic. The decisions have been top-down and state-driven, with institutions needing to manage the crisis rather than lead into and through it. At the same time, however, institutions across the world have reported that their senior management and faculty have been consulted “by public or government officials in the context of public policies relating to COVID-19” (Marinoni, Van’t Land, and Jensen 2020, 19). This demonstrates that leadership at universities stretched beyond the boundaries of institutions, even while within the institution leadership might be impeded. Given the gravity of the COVID-19 crisis, academics soon realised that there was no option but to do things differently if the academic year was to be salvaged. The UJ model of management and leadership adopted was one where decision-making was collective with matrix-like structures that created spaces for consultation and information-sharing as well as informing decision-making. The extent to which this was experienced uniformly is unknown.

The integrity and credibility of the leader are important in a crisis; if the leader is not credible then the message communicated will not be perceived as credible. Leaders must communicate how strategy establishes the mission and vision of the institution and execute the strategy with resolve, adjusting appropriately as more information and the effect of their actions become known. There should be a transparency to the actions of the academic leader in a crisis so that the campus community is clear on the direction in which the institution is heading. The complex structures of decision-making and flows of communication within the university ensured that there were attempts for transparency and clear direction in an unprecedented situation. A rider to this is that events relating to the academic project were evolving at high speed and there were times when there was confusion. Often processes or systems put in place had to be recalibrated and refined as teaching and learning unfolded. This meant that different components of the university community were often in a state of disarray and not sufficiently aligned.

In times such as these, leaders must engage with the complexities of the coronavirus pandemic, collect information as more becomes available and communicate these complexities, perhaps in simpler terms, to all stakeholders while outlining potential plausible solutions. By communicating appropriately to all stakeholders, academic leaders earn the trust of faculty, staff, and students and obtain institutional buy-in and campus commitment in pursuit of strategic opportunities and alternative and sustainable solutions—an ability termed *sensemaking* (Ancona et al. 2007). After some deliberation, UJ used a variety of approaches to do this, including a dedicated website

(<https://www.uj.ac.za/coronavirus/>), circulars, and regular social media engagements. The visibility of the Vice Chancellor and DVCs was evident through online communication, social media platforms and in print media. Responsiveness to queries across the institution improved to the extent that faculty leaders observed that online access felt like they were constantly on call to students. With some faculty this caused additional stresses with a sense of not having a distinction between work time and non-work time and being constantly available. The student was at the centre, and all activities from academic to support services actively practised “servant leadership”. Student participation was measured through the Blackboard platform, and in a counter-intuitive way, student participation in lectures and in assessments reflected patterns of pre-COVID-19 times. While a set of quantitative data allowed for these observations, active debates continued about pedagogical gains and losses, and cognitive concerns about learning with technological support. The completion of the academic year was non-negotiable, but given the stark disparities of students’ contexts, with unequal access to technology, it is unclear whether learning was compromised. The abrupt closure of universities meant that there was little time to consider and plan for ERT. This swung the pendulum in terms of the need for students to become more active in the learning process—with almost equal weight given to teaching and learning. However, given the suite of qualifications offered by the university, and the diverse requirements of modules in terms of content, skills and outcomes, it is yet to be determined if “success” appropriately describes the completion of the academic year.

The critical factors that enabled the university to successfully avert the crisis posed by the pandemic are presented next.

Agile Decision-Making

The university’s established structures, systems and processes were rapidly repurposed to provide the enabling infrastructure for an emergency remote teaching plan to be devised, managed, executed and revised as and when required, while ensuring that there was no compromise in terms of academic or management governance. Resilience and agility characterised all actions, with the university community being informed through weekly updates and a dedicated UJ COVID-19 website. While these are required attributes for leadership, the extent to which these permeate and are equitably received by the wider university community is unknown. Agility required a joined-up and seamlessly aligned university system, but the reality was complex, changing rapidly and synchronicity was not always possible or evident.

Data-Driven Decision-Making

UJ used data and statistics to inform decision-making and monitoring. For example, at the commencement of the lockdown, the university had easy access to data on modules that had a Blackboard presence, and decisions could then be made with deans and academics on rapidly transitioning modules online for the first semester. This quantitative analysis was presented weekly and supported by qualitative analysis from

faculties. The availability of the data enabled rapid identification of where interventions were required and what form these should take. Similarly, the university was able to identify whether students were logging on, the duration spent on the learning management system and whether any activities or tasks were completed. Data, while useful, does not fully provide the true picture in terms of the struggles of academics and students in relation to a completely new way of doing things.

Future-Oriented Teaching and Learning Strategies

The university leadership had commenced, in 2018, with revisiting and re-aligning teaching and learning in line with the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), including the need for increased usage of technology and innovative and flexible teaching models. There was already an above-threshold level of experience and expertise in blended learning across campuses. After having concluded 2020 under exceptionally abnormal circumstances, UJ now has to review its approach to teaching and learning in relation to the question: What (if any) changes are needed in the approach to teaching and learning for it to be optimally purposeful in enabling student learning in all programmes across faculties?

The case for blended/hybrid teaching and learning is compelling, but it has to be a carefully considered strategy, taking into account the differing contexts of students. Access and success are mediated by social class and social capital. The university's capabilities do not compensate for the diverse starting points in terms of equality of opportunity for all students.

The Centre for Academic Technologies (CAT) had been rolling out intensive training prior the crisis and this was key to UJ's success. In March 2020, the emphasis was on departments working to transition modules to an online mode. CAT methodically reviewed more than 1,500 undergraduate modules to assess for online readiness using the following criteria:

1. a structure students can easily follow;
2. a learning guide;
3. evidence of activities in Week 6 of Term 1;
4. presence of assignments; and
5. presence of online assessments.

Where gaps were found in relation to these criteria, interventions were devised and implemented. The technical infrastructure had to align with academic intent and the horizontal coordination between CAT and faculties was critical to the success of this, illustrating the distributed leadership of this strategy. The success of these technical modalities rested on assumptions of equitable access to teaching and learning in an ideal environment. Regional and geographic disparities, urban and rural divides, coupled with socioeconomic fissures rooted in disadvantage, featured as barriers to accessing

teaching and learning. Practically, there was uneven access to bandwidth, insufficient daytime data, and limited access to public facilities with hotspots and inadequate technology. The starkness of South Africa's inequalities has never been so visible.

By Semester 2, with no sign of a full-scale relaxation of lockdown regulations, modules were added on and revised accordingly to be fit for purpose for the online environment. This involved complex decision-making, especially around programmes that required on-site practicals, work-integrated learning or placements. Significant curriculum adjustments had to be made in order to ensure that provision was made for both theory and practicals, though within the constraints of social distancing, lockdown regulations and the very real difficulties encountered with placement of students in clinical facilities. In addition, there were considerable differences in how departments viewed the building blocks of the blended/hybrid terminology in their own disciplinary domains and across modules and subjects, as well as across years and levels of study. The online components in a blended mode of delivery can be planned only in the certainty that they can be readily accessed by every student.

The commencement of online teaching and learning was premised on the principle of a "learner-centred" pedagogy. At all levels of the university and through the different structures, there was a heightened awareness of the contexts of the students, the social realities that often echoed the deep inequities of South African society and the constant need to recalibrate teaching and learning approaches to be more appropriate and responsive. Compassion and care characterised the pedagogical approaches adopted, with the gap between academics and students reduced and becoming closer than during "normal" contact sessions. Academics interviewed for the *QA Report on the Transition to Remote Teaching and Learning* (UJ 2020) commented on this proximity that developed through Blackboard discussions, Zoom lectures and WhatsApp groups. As both academics and students grappled with the teaching and learning processes, close relationships developed. Innovative usage of technology and experimentation by academics led to discoveries of new ways of teaching and learning for both academics and students. Non-cognitive issues became equally important and the enabling infrastructure for students was paramount. The pandemic itself had erected barriers that inhibited access in ways that had not been previously encountered. Barriers that were deeply entrenched in the diverse student contexts remained insurmountable.

Opportunity-Driven Leadership

UJ as a leader in promoting 4IR quickly grasped the opportunity presented by the crisis. Disruption is a feature of the UJ leadership strategy, and the crisis presented a disruption that required exceptional leadership. While the strategies implemented were constantly recalibrated, gaps did exist that were beyond the control of management in some cases and in others were identified only later. The trickle down of leadership within and across the institution was, as could be expected, uneven. However, the defining difference of the pandemic crisis was the building of an academic community where there were benefits in talking to one another and engaging in reflective and reflexive practice.

This shared purpose that gained momentum needs to continue if there is a post-COVID-19 period. A reversion to silo operations in the academic environment would be a regression. Universities are large-scale organisations, characterised by diversity, hierarchy and complexity in functions and operations; they are, by nature, defined by a form of steady-state chaos (Gigliotti 2017). University leaders need to be responsive to this dynamic environment, as their regular management and leadership practices can be threatened by full-blown crises such as the pandemic, which can affect the viability of institutions. Universities' tectonic shifts to the world of the 4IR must be cognisant of the realities of the student population in terms of having the requisite capabilities and resources to keep pace.

A Caring Institution and a Place for Leadership “EQ”

Doraiswamy (2012) suggests that servant leadership is about empowerment, involvement and collaboration as well as prioritising the needs of those led above the priorities of the leaders. At UJ, against the backdrop of vast societal inequality, large numbers of students on state funding and student hunger, the associated pressures of anxiety and stress among staff and students became evident. UJ deployed significant financial resources to support students in need, reprioritising its limited resources. Academics at UJ reported that the remote teaching had at some levels, in a counter-intuitive way, fostered improved student engagement (UJ 2020). Hotlines and helplines emerged, peer information about those in need quickly filtered through, and the need for psychological services burgeoned. Increased family responsibilities for women collided with performance management systems that demanded deliverables in terms of research outputs, completion of studies and other research obligations. These issues required sensitive and generous negotiation. As Goffee and Jones (2000) describe, leaders' tough empathy was also needed at particular moments. Maintaining morale for staff and students and even parents was critical, and the decisive and distributed leadership provided some reassurance and comfort, if not all the resources.

Social Media

At UJ, as the voices of students filtered upwards through numerous channels including social media, the university devised strategies to address, for example, devices and data issues. Working across domains, more than 6,000 laptops were distributed to students, and resources were allocated to ensure that both staff and students were provided with data. This went a long way in ensuring that the teaching and learning processes could continue albeit under difficult circumstances. The *QA Report on the Transition to Remote Teaching and Learning* (UJ 2020) documents the new bonds that developed between academics and students, between support staff and academics and the deepening of the collective responsibility that was displayed. The deepening collegiality and awareness that all voices within the university mattered was significant. This was fostered and nurtured through the open communication channels and feedback loops that went both top-down and bottom-up.

Distributing Leadership

A complex adaptive challenge such as that posed by the coronavirus pandemic cannot be successfully navigated by the charismatic academic leader acting alone (Heifetz and Laurie 2001). What was initially understood as hierarchical and managerial soon became a plan that brought together the collective knowledge of the campus community. Institutional priorities were established, and a combination of senior support and academic teams were delegated leadership responsibilities to manage the implementation of the crisis management strategy at UJ.

The UJ experience showed that distributing leadership responsibilities is more effective than other leadership approaches in a crisis (Berjaoui and Karami-Akkary 2019). It improved the quality of the decisions made as each team is autonomous, self-managed, and empowered to make decisions. At the same time, having a central coordinating system worked favourably as this assisted with sharing information and lessons learnt and collaborative partnerships.

Communicating Clearly

The UJ experience underlined that leaders should communicate clearly and frequently to all stakeholders in a crisis (Edmondson 2020). In the current crisis, unable to communicate face-to-face because of social distancing practices, the Vice Chancellor, Tshilidzi Marwala, opted for the live streaming of updates and messages of encouragement to stakeholders. UJ's updates and communications to staff and students, sometimes daily, and weekly, supported the institution's attempt to create a shared, supportive virtual space in the absence of contact teaching and engagement. This was evident in the letters to staff, students and other stakeholders that provided a valuable resource in terms of developments, news on decisions, implications for various constituencies and provision of vital healthcare information. Faculties and the college established communication with students and staff, ensuring a vital flow of information.

Conclusion

The pandemic has not abated, and the commencement of the 2021 academic year is filled with uncertainties and new complexities. Planning for the future in the absence of knowledge of what the future holds will require agility and responsiveness. There are major conundrums that will confront universities, including unpredictable student enrolments, the new entrants to higher education having had a disrupted academic year as well, shrinking resources in terms of student funding, reprioritisation of university budgets, disruptions to the retention and attraction of international students, and delays to the start of the year triggered by delayed announcements of the National Senior Certificate results. What is clear is that 2021 will not bring a return to "normal" and the new way of managing and leading amid uncertainties requires reflection and constant interrogation.

The pandemic arrived in a highly differentiated and unequal higher education system. As suggested earlier, the ability of institutions to retrieve the academic year and academic project differed widely in terms of available resources and capacity. In this context, management and leadership attempted through innovative practices, partnerships within the university, and with key external stakeholders including the DHET and the private sector, to address to some degree the inequities in the system. This was aimed at levelling the playing fields between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

These strategies will require ongoing refinement. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the extent of South Africa's growing inequality into sharp relief. It has also sharpened these inequalities, as unemployment grows, the value of wages decreases, and the economic outlook appears grim. This has created a new challenge that goes beyond re-packaging or re-purposing higher education, to fundamentally grappling with the conditions of the structure of higher education itself that continue to militate against equity, and that require more urgent, system-level resolutions than are currently on offer.

What is clear is that the mission and vision of universities require review in these changed circumstances. The task for management and leadership is to rethink and revisit teaching and learning in a rapidly changing context and evaluate the opportunities and limitations of virtual and online learning. The traditional model of contact teaching has been threatened not by desire or deliberative strategy but by the circumstances of the pandemic. The building of inclusive communities based on social justice principles must guarantee equity of access and success for all students.

The case study of UJ demonstrates that servant, distributed and communicative approaches to leadership, in combination, are definitive pillars for the management of a crisis particularly. The context of each university is critical in that it shapes and informs responses to a crisis and the success of managing and transcending a crisis. Supporting, understanding and modifying leadership strategies through these unusual times require ongoing recognition and navigation of the uncertainties that will continue to shape teaching, learning and research in times to come. Antiquated, autocratic models layered with bureaucracy will impede responsiveness and agility. As Fernandez and Shaw (2020) argue, a new "toolbox" is required for academic leaders.

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