Covid-19: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Impacts on Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Managing Higher Education in and after the Era of a Worldwide Pandemic

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The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) has become a significant global threat which has continued to have wide-reaching impacts on the world, and on South Africa. Society in general, and the academic project in particular, have been similarly affected by this public health threat. Also, given the risks of human-to-human transmission, a range of social distancing measures became necessary, such as South Africa's national lockdown and the blanket closure of all institutions of higher learning. The global pandemic represents an unprecedented risk to everyday life and most notably, it has the potential to destabilise educational, research and innovation endeavours for South Africa as a whole. In spite of the possible damaging effects, Oparinde and Govender (2020) emphasise that it is feasible to have coping strategies in place to cushion the effect of the pandemic, and that researchers, as well as academics cannot be excused from such important responsibilities.

Like many other world leaders, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa also declared that the country is in a national state of emergency, considering that the virus brought the entire country to its knees. With the nationwide lockdown that started as a 3-week event and eventually got prolonged, it soon became clear that the Covid-19 pandemic has come to stay far beyond earlier imaginations. What further became obvious was that the more prolonged the pandemic, the more negative

effects materialised. The impending situation ushered in a new phrase referred to as the 'new normal', which ingeniously points towards the creation of fresh ways, methods and strategies of proceeding with our daily lives as Covid-19 has forced an instant departure from what used to be the routine. In response to the disruption brought by the pandemic, it became integral for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to seek a redress and prepare for the 'new normal' with respect to the operations and affairs of institutions of higher learning.

The necessity of HEIs is hydra-headed. As crippling as the Covid-19 pandemic is, institutions of higher learning are one of the entities that must continue to function at the highest standard, considering the role they play in the community. Not only do these institutions produce university graduates, but they are also key to the development of the society and economy. While some earlier views of HEIs implied the former, modern views have mostly insinuated the latter or combined the two. For instance, Becker's (1964, 1993) earlier positions suggested that higher levels of education are meant to prepare people for the labour market. Although Becker's view is in some way correct, it does not completely represent the enormous benefits of HEIs which Mokyr (2002) argues should serve the purpose of individual intellectual development, as well as social progression. Just as an individual has a lot to gain from HEIs, so does the society.

HEIs should be perceived from both the epistemological and ontological points of view. While these establishments are meant to produce knowledge, they should also recycle and repurpose produced knowledge within our everyday reality and being. In fact, HEIs should play relevant roles in societal development. Luvalo's (2014) position makes this clear when he pontificates that universities have frequently been regarded as key institutions in the process of social change and development. The implication of this assertion, in the period of Covid-19, is that if HEIs unconsciously concede defeat to the disruption brought about by the pandemic, the resultant situation does not only affect the operations of HEIs, but it equally has dire consequences on the development of the immediate society. It is in acknowledgement of this context that it is momentous to respond quickly to the war the virus has brought upon humanity, by researching mitigating factors to the pandemic with respect to institutions of higher learning. In so doing, the epistemological posture of HEIs as places of knowledge production is safe, while this also assists the ontological stance as a venue where reality and worldview is shaped in the modern community.

The sudden closure of universities coupled with educators and students' unanticipated reliance on technology, as well as many other unexpected challenges, mean that HEIs will indeed face unpremeditated and unprecedented attacks

that universities need to pay serious attention to. Rashid and Yadav (2020) state unequivocally that HEIs must be prepared for a tough road ahead and make tough decisions that will continue to shape and steer the future of students and society. Hence, Rashid and Yadav (2020) expect that the university communities will need to reflect on their educational vision and mission to ensure that student learning outcomes and standards of educational quality are not compromised in their intertwined missions of education, knowledge creation, and service to society. In a supporting view, Al-Baadani and Abbas (2020) affirm that education is one of the determinants of economic development and that it plays a crucial role in shaping human capital in the world.

The traditional way of education has completely changed during the Covid-19 era. This book presents interdisciplinary perspectives that focus on what the impact of Covid-19 implies for their discipline-specific scholarship. Contributors have critically and constructively reflected from within their specific academic disciplines in their attempt to proffer solutions to the disruptions brought to the South African higher education space by the pandemic. Academics and education leaders have particularly responded to the objective of this book by focusing on how the academia could tackle the Covid-19 motivated disruption and resuscitate teaching, research and innovation activities in South African higher education.

Contributions to this book have diversely addressed salient subjects, including how the pandemic may serve as a platform to decolonise higher education in South Africa; leadership concerns at institutions of higher learning during the pandemic; challenges associated with specific universities, especially as influenced by demographics; the hybrid model of teaching and learning as a strategy; the nitty-gritties of virtual classrooms; equitable access to education; the application of the constructivist theory to synchronous learning; challenges associated with postgraduate training; perspectives from social sciences regarding Covid-19; and how we can adopt innovation technologies to drive Africa's response to the pandemic.

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