

CORONAVIRUS EDUCATION

## Online learning in lockdown is far from ideal

Lukhona Mnguni 8 Apr 2020



(John McCann/M&G)

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**I**t is fascinating to see institutions of higher learning during this Covid-19 lockdown being seduced into solutions that could visit injustices on some students.

Universities appear desperate to salvage the first semester at all costs. Most have the ability to deliver their teaching and learning commitments using online platforms. But not all students have laptops or internet connections, especially if they have gone home during the lockdown to places without connectivity.

There is a reason Unisa remains the only long-distance learning institution of high reputation in our country. Its existence is premised in a long-standing logic of delivering learning materials to its students through the post and complementing this with online platforms.

Even with all this prowess in delivery, Unisa remains reliant on students travelling to examination centres around South Africa and the world to sit for their examinations.

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This is because not all modules are open to take home exams and in some instances it is important to avoid open book exams.

In the moment of the Covid-19 panic, universities seem to be taking the risk of throwing away quality standards as they scramble to complete the first semester so that it does not affect the second semester.

But lost in all these considerations are questions on social justice. No one seems to be asking: What is the fair and just thing to do?

For this question to be unpacked properly the socioeconomic dimension of the student body needs to be expounded. Universities are no longer a bastion for society's elites to receive education while the poor and marginalised remain at the margins.

Over the years "the doors of learning" have indeed been opened to as many of society's social classes as possible through what has become known as "the massification of higher education".

This massification has attracted students from rural areas and townships who are unable to afford to pay for their tuition, residence fees and other requirements necessary for their studies.

It is five years since the outbreak of the Rhodes Must Fall protests but it seems the memories of those who manage higher education have forgotten the demands for "free, quality and decolonised" higher education.

These calls were about understanding the differentiated socioeconomic backgrounds of students and how universities should be responsive, adequately, to all students if they are to deliver education in a way that is fair and just.

The conversation at all universities has taken an elitist bias with problematic assumptions. It seems all students can suddenly have laptops or cell phones that are smart enough for capabilities such as zero-rating university websites. This is not true.

Even if this were to happen, some students return to homes where electricity (important to charge devices) is used for lighting or where there is no electricity. We do know the challenges we have with connectivity. I was in Musowdi in Limpopo two weeks ago and Telkom could not give me internet access. There are multiple places with this problem.

South Africa appears to have no capacity to guarantee that learners around the country can have the same quality connectivity at all times. This is the first area of injustice, especially during a lockdown when people cannot move around with ease to areas where it is easier to pick up connections.

There are also reasons why contact learning universities have residences and have ramped up their relationships with landlords to create regulated spaces for students in

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private residences.

This is because we are aware that some students come from homes where there is no conducive environment for them to do their work. I once assisted a student get a place to stay even though his home was within three to four kilometres of the university. Right next to his home was a tavern that played pumping music until the wee hours of the morning. A fight to close down the tavern would be more time consuming and would affect the student's social capital.

In some instances, I have taken work to my grandparents' home in my village but I find it difficult to work there. Not because there isn't enough room, there are just many chores to be done in a day and one cannot expect grandparents to work as hard as they do when one is not around.

These are the realities that confront many students when they are at home.

I have heard a lot of calls from around the world counselling us not to panic or be anxious. Yet, universities pretend their students are at home in the best of mental health conditions.

Some families are under threat of domestic violence during these lockdowns but we believe that students from universities are immune to such. What is our understanding of the mental effect of a lockdown, which, in crude terms, is a form of house arrest? We have no answers but have a serious suspicion that the costs are high.

Some people are already thinking through projects that will focus on post-Covid-19 trauma relief, with religious institutions being called upon to consider responses to all forms of crises such as "broken families, scarred individuals and businesses that will be struggling", as proposed by Reverend Akhona Gxamza of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

We are not going to emerge out of this crisis back to normalcy. Why are institutions of higher learning, which are meant to be beacons of societal enlightenment, missing these crucial points and pretending they can operate as though it is business as usual?

Where are our leading intellectuals, who can see the blind spots? Why are they silent? Is there a self-preservation project underway even though we can see that we are headed on a path of injustice?

What good is it for some privileged universities to believe they can salvage the academic year in ways that the under-resourced universities cannot? What good is it to deliver laptops to National Student Financial Aid students when non-NSFAS students also do not have laptops?

If there is one student who could be left behind by an online teaching regime, then that approach is unjust.

If it means we must forgo the first semester and consider a June 2020 to June 2021 academic year, then let it be. If there is any moment to demonstrate that universities are committed to transformation, it is now. University managers must resist being driven by desperation in the face of a global crisis.

### **Lukhona Mnguni is a PhD candidate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal**

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## Lukhona Mnguni

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