

Conceptualising Online Operations to Transition Student Governance in Higher Education Amid Covid-19: A Turbulent Experience

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the normal and traditional operations of many organised sectors of the global societies. This paper intends to introspect the experience of student governance during this period of a forceful use of e-governance – *force majeure*. Most student organisations from historically disadvantaged institutions and digital struggles are not fully addressed as the result of developments brought by the various stages of Industrial Revolutions. This impacts mostly student movements who emerged ideologically from previous and current underprivileged group in the society. This deprived group through observation demonstrated to have no trust on any technological transmissions regarding sensitive student governance issues. It is arguable that these historic facts have contributed to turbulence for transitioning students to the online platforms. The interest of this paper is to pen down various experiences from observation and conceptual point of view as part of literature review. It also intends to provide more substance to the knowledge production and scholarship, using both (complexity and change management theories). In addition, this paper highlights that some student movements are detached from their own constituencies and have no mandate to govern in the institutions they were elected to lead. The paper remains qualitative and intends to conclude on desktop issues which could be recommended for radical shift in the narrative of student governance in higher education. The findings must intend to open more areas for research in student governance in the era of disaster and introduction of embedded e-governance services through digital means and the post-COVID-19 higher education.

Keywords: COVID-19, e-Voting, Online Platforms, Student Governance, Student Movements

1. Introduction

The period of disaster of any nature contains both advantages and disadvantages, which COVID-19 remains critical for such introspection. From the health perspective, corona viruses are enveloped, positive single-stranded large ribonucleic acid (RNA) viruses that infect humans, but also a wide range of animals (Velavan & Meyer, 2020). In the last two decades, influenza A viruses have been found to occur throughout the animal kingdom, mainly in birds, notably aquatic ones, in which infection is largely intestinal, waterborne, and asymptomatic (Shortridge, 1992), which is also called zoonosis. In contextualising COVID-19 from a higher education point of view, Daniel (2020) suggested that for a start, ramping up capacity to teach remotely, universities and colleges should take advantage of asynchronous learning, which works best in digital formats. On the economic interruption, Baldwin and Tomiura (2020) underscored that COVID-19 is most definitely affecting economic suffering worldwide, which is also in fact being experienced to be as

contagious economically as it is medically. It is also worth noting that COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the learning activities for students in different ways based on their social interaction for group learning to reach the objectives in their courses, level of study and programmes (Daniel, 2020). These are mainly due to restrictions in movement which constituted the traditional mass activities where student learning activities and governance matters were extremely affected.

The impact of COVID-19 forced student governance to migrate to online platforms that limited the social and traditional ways of mass mobilisation and activism. It may also be argued that COVID-19 is a hindrance for lobbying and asserting influence in representing students due to restrictions that limited physical assemblies. These factors required change management to navigate into a new space, which Sacheva (2009) suggested that change is hard because generally people overestimate the value of what they have - and underestimate the value of what they may gain by giving that up. On the other hand,

people's resistance to implementation of e-governance for receiving services is what has culminated to the poor rating of e-governance in the public service and higher education in the pre-Covid-19 society (Abasilim, 2015). The above experience is observed not exclusive to students in higher education spaces, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the view to transition, COVID-19 created a compelling circumstance for implementation of e-governance where student leadership have been observed to be moving from resistance to scepticism but forced to adapt. The paper remains a conceptual with desk-top issues to deconstruct the experiences on how COVID-19 has affected student governance in higher education. The paper intends to conclude and provide recommendations on how these experiences can be translated into broad discourse on future higher education.

2. Setting the Scene

While contextual overview of COVID-19 was provided in the earlier section to define the crux of the challenge. It is necessary to problematise how it has affected student governance to lay basis for the study. Political actions by student organisations and student governments are legitimised as a form of activism that depends on ideological mobilisation (Klemenčič & Park, 2018). Student governance in its nature is depended on political mobilisation and participation by the broader constituency. These activities traditionally invoked activism which necessarily means mass mobilisation, which in this period of COVID-19 remains an anti-thesis of curbing the virus from spreading. The crux is how student governance has transitioned this period in representing students, conducting its annual elections and how to create all these experiences for future works on student governance. The context in this case would be transforming the pedagogies of student governance to embrace e-governance in conceptualising and intensifying digitalisation.

3. Theoretical Framework

It is important to first clarify what a theoretical framework is, with a view to clarify the orientation of the study conducted. Simon and Goes (2011) suggested that developing a theoretical framework that guides the logic of what one is intending to through a study can be challenging, and therefore important to provide well supported rationale for the reader to locate the author's perspective. Theoretical

framework brings to light various conceptual and empirical evidence about the related questions of the study undertaken to relate to scientific narrative (Norris, Guilbert, Smith, Hakimelahi & Phillips, 2005). For ease of focus, this study explores Complexity theory and Change Management theory to explain the COVID-19 in relation to student governance and how to adapt to new systems of inculcating and navigating to e-governance.

3.1 Complexity Theory

The advent of COVID-19 changed the traditional way of doing business in many sectors of the society. It is ideal to adapt the impact of the pandemic by simply traversing the complexity theory to deconstruct how COVID-19 has affected student governance. Complexity theory argues that systems are complex interactions of many parts which cannot be predicted by accepted linear equations (Morrison, 2012), which shares much of its narrative with Chaos theory. Considering observation of the world's evolution, Hasan (2014:49) suggested that most people agree that the world is becoming increasingly more complex. While on the other hand to understand complexity further, we turn to generally agreed principles of complexity theory where emergence, co-evolution, self-direction and self-organisation are paramount (Hasa, 2014:51). As complexity-based theories become rooted in various established contemporary discourses of management research and practice, it is vital at all material times to take stock and examine the extent to which the narrative of complexity theories progressed to enhance developments in the field of leadership (Rosenhead, Franco, Grint & Friedland, 2019). It is in this context that COVID-19 has not only brought health risk, but social interaction as an embedded value system for student governance remains constrained. While presented an opportunity to finetune new order of operation that thrives in complexities.

3.2 Change Management Theory

The conceptual overview of change management can be traced from the 90s period of the John Kotter model. It is arguable that while change management is important for transformation and modernisation, the biggest mistake in attempting change is to allow complacency (Kotter, 1996; Neumeier, 2013). Demonstration of observed interruption has been throughout active sectors of the political spectrum. Student governance is required to adapt to the new

order of doing business. Mento, Jones and Dirndorfer (2002) noted that there is an existing literature in the area of change management and its models to guide and navigate the implementation areas of major changes in any organisation. COVID-19 dominated world conjures up a wide array of thoughts and emotions, which were experienced as more pervasive, or more consistently discussed than that of change management. It is in this context that the conceptualisation of change management served to be a pervasive than embedded consequence of the realities and complexities of COVID-19. Change management provides framework that assists student governance to adapt to e-governance and this theory assists to conceptualise the paper and ease of focus.

4. Covid-19 and Higher Education Complexities: South African Context

South Africa inherited a higher education system which was profoundly shaped by social, political and economic inequalities of class, race, gender, region and institutions bestowed by the history of apartheid (Shrivastava & Shrivastava, 2014). This picture of fragmented higher education was not resourced equally with unequal capacity to advance teaching and learning. The COVID-19 pandemic presented itself as a huge challenge to education systems (Daniel, 2020). This notion is argued through pointing to a new experience for higher education in South Africa. The story of South African higher education has been traditionally face-to-face, which provided social aspect to the traditional pedagogy. It is noted that the pedagogy change created an unstable environment to higher education as a sector. Of noting, Ali (2020) underscored that considering the rising concerns about the spread of COVID-19 and calls to contain it, a growing number of tertiary institutions have shutdown face-to-face classes globally. It is arguable that COVID-19 in the context of higher education had downplayed the traditional learning and teaching. However, that was not the only aspect affected, student governance traditions of mass mobilisation have also "hit the snag". Societies of the world's most unequal continent, where many depend on informal work for their livelihood have also tested by this pandemic (Blofield, Hoffmann & Llanos, 2020). It is in this context that higher education in South Africa is still a representation of an unequal society, which affected conceptual expectation of student leadership and student movements broadly.

While COVID-19 triggered the transformation of student governance, this might mean speedy reforms to rethink size and shape of student governance and modernist ways of its establishment. Luescher (2005) suggested that at the level of student governments, some isolated studies have emerged, where old tools have come with age. Typically, where a large narrative was that student governments are distinguished in terms of their size, electoral system, resourcing, and internal constitution. However, during the lethal pathogen of COVID-19, the reform process was mainly about cautioning the Student Representative Council/s (SRC's) constitutions and electoral reforms to inter-connect in the context of this health disaster. At the centre of the electoral reform, was the fear of migration to online platforms as observed in historically black institutions. This assumed the narrative that electoral systems are the primary vehicle for choice and representational governance, which is the foundation for democratisation. These systems must provide opportunities for all, including the most disadvantaged, to participate in and influence government policy and practice (López-Pintor, 2000). The narrative created total anxiety over the expectation of this total migration in the context of the societal technological divides.

5. Financial Burden Caused by Covid-19

While student governance has historically been a vanguard of the less privileged students in higher education, it has necessitated that economic challenges of such students remains vast vulnerable. Raaper and Brown (2020) noted that while financial pressures and online modes of teaching are now part of common discourse among university staff, there is less attention paid to student experience. This includes specific support needed by students from different socio-economic backgrounds. It has been observed by the author that universities traversed in difficult way based on uncertainties that existed to transition students. This was also not easy on student governance who found themselves in darkness and dependent on both government and senior management for solutions.

According to Astawa and Dewi (2018), e-government in higher education can be utilised in order to provide public services to stakeholders both internally and externally. It was evident that based on the types of innovation, higher education could use the e-governance for teaching, learning activities and

support for students. Ullah, Pinglu, Ullah, Abbas and Khan (2021) suggest that e-governance focuses on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), which means to support, endure or maintain, and sustainable development. In this context, it simply means that fluid activity directed at stabilising the present and future challenging requirements such as ongoing and future impact of COVID-19. The use of technology as pedagogy in higher education for its operational purpose was received with mixed feelings due to scepticism to transition by student leadership and movements. This experience is against the bedrock that higher education must lead the societal development in the context of SDG's. It has also therefore necessitated additional cost implications that were not anticipated to prepare a new field for services to students.

6. Turbulence to Transition During Covid-19

While learning and operations were shifted remotely, to student governance and students in general, this created an impression of a traditional distance learning. The advent of COVID-19 fractured the normal learning and teaching in higher education and put some students' graduation ceremonies in jeopardy by simply not being able to walk on the graduation stage. On the other hand, it is like distance education which could be successful when the subject interprets the possible barriers (social interaction, administrative issues, student motivation, and time/support for studies) conveniently and efficiently (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Roman & Plopeanu, 2021). It is in this context that these factors frustrated student leadership on what remain the gains for student struggles under this circumstance. The scepticism deepened and created complexities to transition higher education operation while still care about transitioning students to the online platforms and their (students) general wellbeing.

7. Comprehension of Lockdown Implications

The introduction of a lockdown presented new difficulties due to restricted movement of people which created new paradigms that compromised outdoor learning and activist's political mobilisation for students in general. Comprehending this new phenomenon propagated new creative and innovative way of indoor political activities that reduce social interactions amongst the students

which unfortunately created stressful environment. Further to the issue of implications, the literature suggested that stress "*which is chief amongst all*" is best viewed as an interpretative paradigm between the stressors and the individual's psychological reactions (Sundarasen, Chinna, Kamaludin, Nurunnabi, Baloch, Khoshaim, Hossain & Sukayt, 2020). The lived experience of lockdown came at the cost for the psychological being of the students, which remains an anti-thesis of learning and teaching, and human development. Sundarasen *et al.* (2020) further postulated that at the centre of all, anxiety is regarded as a subcategory of psychological impact which is getting attracted by the poor conditions where majority of university students live and generated into depression. Maintaining positive mental health can be challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic which undoubtedly caused devastating consequences on people's lives (Arslan, Yıldırım, Karataş, Kabasakal & Kılınc, 2020). In another international global study on COVID-19 implications, Zhou, Liu, Xue, Yang and Tang (2020) noted that National Health Commission of China released principles for emergency psychological crisis intervention for the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has also proven as part of the lived experiences that being infected with COVID-19 required isolation at the comfort of your family. This isolation remained one of the strategies to curb the spread, but it proved to be consequential to the psychological being of students at universities. For instance, quarantining of infected student and social distancing were implemented to restrict the virus' spread and reduce interactions with individuals infected with COVID-19 (Sundarasen *et al.*, 2020), yet another effect to social implication to a psychological being of a student. All these challenges of students were part of the complexities of work which necessitated the SRC's grapple with in the interest of navigating to the persisting challenges of students with no direct solutions to the challenges. All these challenges also reaffirmed that it was a new era of foregrounding new strategies for transitioning higher education in the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. Traversing Student Hunger: Covid-19 Era

In the pre-COVID-19 higher education, an anti-thesis to learning and teaching in universities remained student hunger which invoked a conceptualisation of student economy. It is vital to introspect how hunger affected students during COVID-19,

especially towards learning and teaching. There is growing awareness that a substantial share of undergraduates are food insecure, potentially undermining investments in higher education and hindering upward social mobility (Broton, Weaver & Mai, 2018). From a global context, Guerra (2021) suggests that student services are critical for food insecure. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic as institutions extended breaks and converted to online instruction, students lost access to, at least temporarily, critical services such as student food pantries, meal vouchers, educational resources, counselling services, and coordinated benefit offices. While it has been observed that student hunger during COVID-19 pandemic was persistent given loss of jobs by guardians; collapse of economy ignited by restriction of movement.

Globally, with the lived experience of Covid-19 affecting all spheres of life, there is an increased Gross Domestic Product (GDP) loss by countries (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020; Iwuoha & Jude-Iwuoha, 2020). This simply suggested that food security challenge is generally persisting to increase and there is hunger, the health of individuals and societies are at risk, education and other forms of meaningful living is at risk (Iwuoha & Jude-Iwuoha, 2020). In other words, the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) are being impacted negatively. Contextualising university space reaffirms that it is difficult to exonerate the higher education institutions from these global challenges, that impact on the resettlement of students to progress in their learning endeavours. The intentional transition remains the realities of traversing the volatility, uncertainties, complexities and ambiguities (VUCA) world. These new world necessitated new conjuncture created by Covid-19, which is heralded as a catalyst for significant change. However, the nature of change and whether it challenges remain fiscal support which is also impacted negatively with persisting inequalities remains to be seen (Badat, 2020). Having laid the basis for existing inequalities that exists within the student population, the initiatives of creating food banks remained more relevant than before during this period of COVID-19. In conceptualising the initiative, Berti, Giordano and Mininni (2021) suggest that food banks are usually presented as a win-win solution to tackle the food paradox, despite being quite controversial. Indeed, food banks are highly contested because, according to critics, they do not aim to address the structural causes, but rather they only intervene on the effects of the food paradox.

The paradoxes of poverty and wealth, shortage and demand, ignorance and knowledge, comfort and necessity, misery and opulence, development and underdevelopment (Cenci, 2020), are at the core of the debate around food security.

The implications of food security remain an anti-thesis for human development which requires strategic mitigation for any developing nation. de Haas (2019) argued why and how migration should be conceptualised as an intrinsic part of broader processes of development and social change instead of as the antithesis of development, as dominant discourses hold. A massive social compact initiative of SRC's towards nutrition has been observed as a way to upkeep students and contain the movements with a view to curb the cluster outbreaks. While recognising that nutrition program is a responsibility of all civil societies, the school closures during lockdown have halted some initiatives, but the weekly nutritional program has continued in new, socially distanced forms (Francis & Pegg, 2020), which addressed both curbing of the spread and hunger amongst students. COVID-19 has therefore remained a gamechanger for massive focus of student leadership in addressing the social wellbeing of the students, such as student nutrition.

9. Migration of Student Activities in Turbulent Times

In conceptualising the significance of student activities, higher education institutions in South Africa and elsewhere in the world aspire to produce agile graduates who are forever catalysts for transforming the society and provide value added inputs for development (Sebake, 2018). The need for student life activities are embodiment of social learning that promote soft skills to comprehend the fundamentals of life post-university level as they are building confidence which is a rubric of human development. However, to get control over COVID-19 pandemic is possible to a greater extent with people's unbridled determination of the stringent precautionary measures such as maintaining social distancing, following medically instructed quarantine process and embracing hygiene and sanitisation (Khachfe, Chahrour, Sammouri, Salhab, Makki & Fares, 2020; Mishra, Gupta & Shree, 2020). It is worth noting that student life activities are fundamentally affected as they are an anti-thesis of COVID-19 protocols during the persistent period of lockdown due to the nature of controlled social gatherings.

The lived experience of traversing this migration was not an easy for university students informed by the reality that the period was anchored by a persistent interruption to dismantle the old instruments of foregrounding student life activities, which Sălceanu (2020) suggested that major and unprecedented interruption led to the persistent anxieties in some students. On the other hand, it is worth noting that universities have taken steps to acquire access to platforms that can be used in the educational environment, also providing the necessary support for carrying out activities (Sălceanu, 2020). Student life activities in this pandemic period were at halt and have completely created "ghost campuses". It has however, proven as observed that online platforms were to an extent implemented but produced minimal impact due to absence of interaction, which remains an embodiment of human social capital.

10. Navigating Student Elections in Covid-19

Elections are one of the tools of democracy in relation to the establishment of the government of the people, by the people, for the people. The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, and various statutes of universities guiding the traditions and norms on how to conduct the SRC elections annually (Sebake, 2019). Elections generally are about political vibrancy, mood and mass mobilisation; however, health risk due to COVID-19 remains a concern. Tarouco (2021) suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic increased health concerns related to every public activity wherever people are supposed to get together, the risk of contagion led to distancing requirements. Elections and their management also implicate meetings and challenge the institutions in charge of coordinating this important democratic activity (Tarouco, 2021). Various measures have been taken by the government to achieve this without causing any damage to the fairness in the procedures involved in the electoral process because public confidence is the backbone of this grand system. Meenakshi and Murugan (2016) noted that e-Voting provides opportunity to expand the e-governance system for elections. On the other hand, the underlying argument is that addressing students scepticism towards e-Voting stemmed from the fact that voters do not trust "Online platforms" which is possibly influenced by negative media reports regarding the susceptibility of e-Voting to tampering, failure, or fraud in the aftermath of every election (Alvarez, Katz & Pomares, 2011).

COVID-19 created a platform to mitigate the long battle of digitalising SRC elections in universities despite a long-protracted debate of mistrust on the system. The process of dismantling the manual pedagogy was received with mixed feelings, however, it was anchored by Change Management. The methods of e-Voting explored, which Emilia, Miruna-Elena and Simion (2021) argue that it is relatively a new concept used in the democratic processes that was found more assisting in reducing errors and to improve the integrity of the election process. It is observed to have brought an exciting moment of data drive to foreground students' activities of this magnitude. Accordingly, elections are about mobilisation to deliver the essence of democracy. Widhiasthini (2020) noted that democracy has always been identified with politics and is an indicator of political stability in any setting and therefore, the practice of democracy on a large scale can be observed in the implementation of various types of elections. The lived experience in this instance has proven how the "*Hypodermic Needle Theory*" using multimedia platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and online Webinars can be instrumental in the ever-persisting data drive age. These instruments assisted in mobilisations and general campaigns for SRC elections.

11. Voter Turnout

Elections are a game of numbers and require mass mobilising to ensure that most of the voters express their views through the ballot. Larson (2007) suggested that in the elections experience using e-Balloting for the first time, the results were very good, which their goal was to increase the voter turnout from 17% to 20%. On the other hand, e-Voting or the use of Information Technology (IT) for balloting, can be classified as one of e-government applications. It remained a tested system due to experienced gradual decline in the number of voters in traditional manual elections which many studies have been conducted to consider the perceived barriers to the implementation of electronic voting (Mori, 2005; Kahani, 2006). The assessment of e-Voting or e-Balloting beyond its handiness during COVID-19 period was experienced to be of great help for students' and regarding voter turnout. The perspective of manual elections had experienced apathy which have created governance structures that are not fully voted by the majority. In a different study conducted, absentee voting – receiving and returning ballots by mail – is an increasingly

popular alternative; after absentee voting began in California in 1978, the state experienced a 20% increase in voter participation (Patterson & Caldeira, 1985; Yao & Murphy, 2007). It is in this context that students' participation in the comfort of their own space has been found easy to increase the voter turnout. This observed experience is embedded in the effort of foregrounding e-governance as a fundamental in embracing digital world.

12. Soliciting Student Mandate and Activating Agency

Post elections period requires a governance structure to implement its elections manifesto. This period requires more engagements with constituencies with intend to review or prioritise competing demands at hand. Aulich (2009) suggested that citizen participation in public affairs has traditionally and largely been centred on measures to facilitate greater public access to information about government, enhance the rights of citizens to be 'consulted' on matters which directly affect them. This in turn would ensure that all voices can be heard equally through fair systems of representative democracy. In this context, it is required in the interest of strengthening democracy that the elected structure of governance meets with their constituency to review the mandate through consultation as part of embedded democracy. COVID-19 has introduced a new paradigm of applying e-governance systems to consult the constituencies design and intensified during this period of lethal pathogen. In the study of Baloran (2020), the results reflected that about 54% to 56% of students avoid social contact, large meetings, and gatherings. This experience provided insight to elected leaders of students in higher education regarding adapting to online mass meetings which seem to have denied social culture of engagements and activism generally.

In this context, questioning what has happened in the era of Covid-19 is important at the macro level where bottom-up decision-making per se has been jettisoned, as governments, medical experts and public health officials construct strategic responses to curb COVID-19 where participation of the citizenry at large has implications (Kenny, 2020). In response to the experienced constraint, Ferrara (2020) noted that with people moving out of physical public spaces due to containment measures to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, online platforms become even

more prominent tools to understand social discussion. While social movement activists' perspective was that they have expected that this challenging time would be at best a period of latency, a time between two active phases when activists would go back to their private life and wait for the lockdown to ease to come back to the streets and movements activities (Pleyers, 2020). The observation of student leaders opting for communicating via social media platforms was seen to be the only solution for a new era that kept an ongoing activism and still protect students for exposure of COVID-19. It has however, been noted that a new concept of activism was discovered by student leaders which defined a new formulated order as "e-activism". It is also worth reflecting on how activism and mass mobilisation have always been an important tool of aiding democracy, the adaptation to digital world has served as an opportunity to rethink a new world order where technology controls the space the society occupies.

13. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study of COVID-19 in the context of its implications on higher education presented an opportunity for evaluative efforts of transforming higher education in the digital age. The paper argued the Complexity theory; and Change Management theory as the consequence of the earlier. These theoretical frameworks were used to deconstruct the existing higher education and student governance systems and its elections pedagogies through digital platform as significantly demonstrated during this period of the pandemic. The broad argument was presented through the review of the literature that demonstrated that COVID-19 had a significant impact on higher education and student governance. The impact affected social wellbeing of the students, persisting impact of lockdown on individual movements for students, and adapting to technology and other means of remote activities created some forms of discomfort. Student hunger was presented as a real challenge that reflects the outlook of the inequalities and it has been observed to be persisting during the period of COVID-19, which needed to be treated as crisis of its own agency. Chief to the challenges demonstrated was how the alternated SRC elections to e-Voting met with scepticism, although results of conducting e-Voting demonstrated accuracy and voter turnout improved significantly. COVID-19 has been presented as a health crisis which provided

opportunity for rethinking a reform process that is underpinned by efficiency through embracing digital transformation which was a compelling reality. In adapting to the new order in COVID-19 and post, this paper suggests the following radical shift as recommendations.

- Rethink the focus of the student leadership and programmes that remain relevant to aid student's success in higher education remain important to draw from lessons of COVID-19.
- Rethink the future works of teaching and learning on hybrid to expand access, which is in line with resolving the long outstanding struggles of students.
- Provide opportunity of added value programme through online space to cater for students that might take learning remotely.
- Review the SRC Constitutions to embed the practices of e-Voting for navigating to e-governance and digitalisation.
- Foreground student engagements as an opportunity to intensify change management as an ongoing activity to comfort students and involve them in changes that are taking place.

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