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# Crisis leadership: Reflecting on the complex role of academic (middle) leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic

## Abstract

*This article examines the experiences and coping strategies of four university middle-managers during the unprecedented time of disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We use the research approach of autoethnography to reflect on our experiences and decision-making processes. To reflect on how we managed the rapid change and moved from survivalist actions to more systemic responses in a new and uncertain reality, we draw on concepts which highlight the importance of connectedness, distributive leadership and communicating clearly. Intuitively following these principles, and being decisive and pragmatic are what enabled all four departments to stabilise and move out of a survivalist reactive mode. Two clear patterns emerged from our reflections. Firstly, it is evident that the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing challenges and shone a bright light on existing shortcomings. A second pattern was that there was simply no other option but to improve systems and processes. We conclude that it is vital to continue asking difficult questions about the long-term implications of the profound changes delivered by the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes the move to hybrid teaching and how we can regain a proactive stance, facilitating inclusive long-term change.*

**Keywords:** *academic leaders, blended learning, COVID-19 pandemic, crisis leadership, historically disadvantaged university, online environment.*

## 1. Introduction

The higher educational landscape was not spared the dramatic impact of COVID-19. In fact, it would be reasonable to say that the education system in South Africa was dealt some of the harshest blows due to the pandemic. COVID-19 lockdowns had massive implications for tertiary institutions. After South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa had declared a national state of disaster and put the country on a strict lockdown level in March 2020, tertiary institutions around the country were required to follow suit by imposing campus lockdowns. This necessitated a switch to a purely online learning and teaching mode for a sustained period. From the second half of 2020, some institutions offered



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limited face-to-face contact on campus (supplemented by live streaming of lectures) adopting the so-called hybrid mode, while other institutions remained purely online. These practices continued in 2021 until more institutions gradually reverted to more face-to-face teaching (albeit primarily in small classes with constraints on venue capacity) in 2022, especially with the vaccination rollout around the country.

Overseeing these rapid changes were departmental chairs (middle managers). The role of middle managers in higher education is a complex role at the best of times. The pandemic and campus lockdowns drastically changed how academic departments operate. This article aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on the impact of COVID-19 on the higher education landscape by examining the experiences and coping strategies of four university middle managers based at a South African historically disadvantaged university (HDI) during the unprecedented disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, in terms of the autoethnographic approach, this article aims to i) reflect on our lived experiences as middle managers, and ii) situate our experience within the literature using relevant theoretical concepts. Ultimately, it aims to provide a rich sense of the challenges that managers had to face in balancing the competing interests of various stakeholders, including students, staff and the university as a whole.

## 2. Research approach and research question

For this article we followed an autoethnographic approach. According to Adams, Ellis and Jones (2017), Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Mendez (2013), autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience (“auto”) to describe and interpret (“graphy”) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (“ethno”). They indicate that auto-ethnographers engage in rigorous self-reflection – typically referred to as “reflexivity” – in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life. In this article we write about the self, calling on memory and hindsight to reflect on our past experiences and then we collectively reflect on these to provide deeper insights into those experiences. As Adams *et al.* (2017: 2) indicate, the purpose of this approach is to articulate insider knowledge of a particular experience and to provide information that would not otherwise be known. Given the focus on personal experience, auto-ethnographers describe moments of everyday experience that cannot be captured through more traditional research methods.

The research questions addressed in this article (and answered through the narrative that follows) are:

- How did middle managers in academia adjust to and cope with profound changes delivered by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What processes assisted academic departments in continuing their academic programme during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What lessons emerge from reflecting on the process of adapting academic activities during the COVID-19 period?

## 3. Challenges in higher education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

There are many interrelated economic and social factors that could have an impact on how academic departments coped with the disruption caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Students and academics in particular faced numerous challenges in an environment characterised by an abrupt move to purely online or blended teaching mode in the 2020–2022 period. The South

African socio-economic context meant that many students did not have access to personal computers and laptops, which forced many to rely on their mobile phones (Khan *et al.*, 2020; Khoza, Khoza & Mukona, 2021; Neuwirth, Jovic & Mukherji, 2020; Patrick, Abiolu & Abiolu, 2021; Khan, 2022). This finding is not surprising, especially within the South African context, given the extent of poverty in the country. According to the 2020 General Household Survey data (Statistics South Africa, 2021), only 8.3% of South African households had an internet connection at their residences, whereas 64.1% of households reported they had access to the internet via their mobile devices.

Students reported that they could not afford the cost of an internet connection or mobile data. Thus, some tertiary institutions partnered with the South African government and internet providers by negotiating zero-rated access to the university's e-teaching website (Armoed, 2021). Even as access and affordability issues were resolved in some instances, there were students that still experienced connectivity and reliability problems, especially students based in rural provinces (Maatuk *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, even when provided with data and devices, some were simply unable to adapt to a non-conventional mode. These are students who found it difficult to cope with online classes, feeling lost and worried, because suddenly they needed to adopt something unfamiliar, without social interaction with classmates, while simultaneously dealing with challenging home environments that were not conducive to study (Neuwirth *et al.*, 2020; Treve, 2021). Additionally, some students had to deal with extra household responsibilities as their parents had lost their jobs (Neuwirth *et al.*, 2020). Postgraduate students faced particular difficulties in conducting their fieldwork. For example, it was a challenge to ensure that research subjects felt safe to share confidential information in an online interview or survey.

Lecturers, like students, faced numerous challenges posed by the pandemic. This included the challenge of transitioning to an online-based teaching environment (Dison *et al.*, 2022). In fact, some felt they had less control over online classes (Na & Jung, 2021). Concerns about academic dishonesty committed by students doing online assessments is another issue that emerged (Landa *et al.*, 2021; Nasution, 2021). Moreover, as Paudel (2021) argues, efficient time management and the provision of speedy online feedback were challenging for instructors. Sahoo, Gulati and UI Haq (2021) also argue that some academics found it difficult to transition to the work-from-home environment. Dawood and Van Wyk (2021) highlight another key difficulty, the challenge of conducting supervision activities virtually. Lastly, numerous studies mention the importance of providing adequate support and training to students and staff (Ali, 2020; Chedrawi, 2021) because they have different digital skills, resulting in a struggle to adapt to "the new normal" of online learning, teaching and assessment.

#### 4. The role of departmental chairs in managing the COVID-19 crisis

As outlined, students and staff were vulnerable and affected negatively because of various issues relating to the pandemic. Within this context, it is useful to ask how departmental chairs managed the rapid change. More importantly, were they able to move from survivalist actions to more systemic adjustments in a new and uncertain reality? If this is the case, what did they do to turn the corner to create stability for staff and students under their watch?

While there is a growing body of literature on the impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning and how the pandemic changed the way academics operate, there is limited literature on the challenges facing middle managers overseeing these drastic changes and how they

dealt with the crisis at departmental levels. Some of the challenges that middle managers faced were not experienced by higher-level managers. For example, middle managers are “trapped in the middle”, overseeing and liaising with lower-level departmental staff and students, and simultaneously providing information and reporting to higher-level staff. Middle managers are ultimately the engine of any institution. It is, therefore, useful to explicitly reflect on the challenges faced by middle-level managers (namely departmental chairpersons) in academia as a result of the pandemic.

Two exceptions are studies conducted by Menon and Motala (2021) and Gigliotti (2021). Menon and Motala (2021) investigated the leadership challenges and changes that took place at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) since the start of the pandemic. The study found that whilst rapid decisions were made by senior management at the start of the lockdown, distributed leadership gradually takes place over time, as responsibility is diffused through numerous organisational channels. This happens by ensuring continuous communication and clarity of purpose with key stakeholders and securing the necessary buy-in to deliver the university’s mandate. Also, students should be placed at the centre of all activities, ranging from academic to support services.

In Gigliotti’s (2021) study in the United States of America, 172 departmental chairs participated in a survey to discuss their challenges under the pandemic. They found complexities in academic leadership, as ‘virtual’ leadership is very different from physical leadership. Ongoing communication was essential despite the lack of certainty. Moreover, some chairs faced the dilemma of spending an excessive amount of time conducting individual check-ins with department staff members, while simultaneously needing to provide support for and address the needs of higher-level managers. In other words, they need to deal simultaneously with micro- (personal communication) and macro- (moving curriculum, teaching and assessment online) issues. As a result, some chairs expressed pessimism, while others adopted a favourable view, which they saw as the reinvention of higher education.

## 5. The context: University of the Western Cape

It is important to preface our reflections by considering the background of our university and the challenges and circumstances of our students, since it has direct bearing on our experiences as middle-managers. The University of the Western Cape (UWC) was founded in 1960 and is what is known as a *Historically Disadvantaged Institution* (HDI). Historically disadvantaged institutions were established by the apartheid system where historically white institutions were elevated while historically black institutions faced a set of deep challenges emanating from their roots in apartheid. To a large extent, the university has overcome the shackles of its past (Africa & Mitizwa-Mangiza, 2018). THE UWC has grown to establish itself firmly as one of the top South African universities and a producer of world-class teaching and research.

Indeed, it is a dynamic institution committed to excellence in learning, teaching, research and innovation in a globally competitive environment while remaining true to the values and spirit that have shaped its identity as a university rooted in serving the public good. It is recognised as an institution of access, affording people the opportunity to change their lives and positively impact their families and communities, thus contributing to the building of a more equitable society. The university’s motto, *Respice, Prospice*, translated from Latin means ‘looking back, looking forward’ and reminds staff and students that they are the architects of a significantly greater potential future. The sense of community is palpable at the institution.

At the UWC the pandemic came with many additional challenges due to the financial constraints facing the students and their families. Following the hard lockdown, the UWC management and academic staff were left with the gargantuan task of making swift, sound and responsible choices that would result in the best outcome for its student community. To save the academic year, a number of compromises and quick decisions had to be made. This was the same for other tertiary institutions. However, as the saying goes, all were facing the same storm, but all were not in the same boat. Du Plessis *et al.* (2022) and Mtshweni (2022) argue that the journey was not smooth and easy for all institutions, as the pandemic exposed the stark inequalities within and amongst universities. Some institutions rapidly switched to online teaching without major problems, while others encountered numerous obstacles relating to resource constraints and learners' difficult socio-economic circumstances. As an institution, we faced the enormous task of making it through the year with a student body dealing with very difficult realities, given their precarious working-class living circumstances.

When the pandemic forced the physical closure of the campus, numerous mechanisms were put in place to provide additional support to students and staff. For the former group, all registered students were provided monthly data support of up to 30GB for academic purposes only. Some students were permitted to stay at a campus residence, subject to sticking to the maximum capacity and social distancing rules. All students were given Virtual Private Network (VPN) access to access off-campus, internal digital university services. By April 2020, the UWC had adopted the "#NoStudentLeftBehind" slogan, which meant that, given the challenges our students were enduring, the institution would endeavour to afford every student the best chance of success.

Last but not the least, in addition to tutors, Graduate Assistants (GAs) were introduced to support teaching staff. The GAs assisted in tutor coordination, administration, communication and the electronic management of teaching materials (for example, providing study guides and pre-recorded videos). In terms of additional support to staff, the above-mentioned monthly data, VPN and a 'Wizzpass' quick response (QR) code for campus access were also provided. The UWC launched its own vaccination centre for students and staff (and their spouses and parents). At the start of 2022, fully vaccinated students were allowed to return to campus, while those who were not vaccinated were eligible to apply for exemptions based on human or religious grounds. Students who were granted permission to enter campus were also given a 'Wizzpass' QR code.

The chairpersons of the four units writing this article are from the Department of Accounting, Department of Economics, Department of Political Studies and the Institute for Social Development (ISD). All four departments are located in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS). The EMS is the largest faculty, with 4 216 undergraduate and 1 252 postgraduate registered students in the 2022 academic year. Moreover, the faculty consists of 11 academic units in total, with two research units offering postgraduate programmes and nine academic units offering both undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

The Accounting Department is governed not only by university governance processes, but also by the South African Institute of Professional Accountants (SAIPA) and the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA), which oversee the accreditation of its degrees. At postgraduate level, the Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting (PGDA) is a SAICA-accredited qualification. Some undergraduate programmes are named degrees relating specifically to Accounting (e.g. BCom Accounting and BCom Financial Accounting). Economics is a highly

popular major subject in the BCom General programme. Political Studies modules are a compulsory component of the BAdmin programmes and are offered as an elective in the Law Faculty and a major in the Arts Faculty. Lastly, ISD only offers postgraduate programmes and courses. We believe that reflecting on what happened to these four academic units provides a balanced and well-rounded picture of how middle-level managers coped with the lockdown. At postgraduate levels, Economics, Political Studies and the ISD offer Honours programmes that involve coursework modules, research methodology modules as well as the year-long research essay modules; Accounting only offers the coursework programmes. Lastly, at Master's level, Economics offers only the full-thesis programme, while Political Studies and the ISD offer both structured coursework and full-thesis programmes.

Before the pandemic and campus lockdown took place, face-to-face lectures took place for approximately 65 days or 13 weeks per semester, and it is typical that tutorials (that involve the tutors having face-to-face contact with students in small groups) support the lectures at undergraduate courses. During the pandemic these were either synchronous (live online classes) or asynchronous (pre-recorded videos are created and uploaded before classes commence). Since the lockdown in March 2020, the EMS faculty offered lectures and tutorials purely online for the balance of 2020 and even 2021. In addition, students wrote both formative and summative assessments online, with the aid of the university's learning management platform, iKamva, which provides a wide range of learning, teaching, assessment, grading and even consultation tools.

At both institutional and faculty levels, numerous online webinars took place to provide workshops to staff on how to use advanced iKamva teaching and assessment tools and other online teaching tools (e.g. pre-recorded video websites). At the EMS faculty, one staff member per academic unit was nominated as the 'Online teaching champion' to provide additional support to colleagues in their respective home units. Furthermore, a drastically revamped EMS Learning and Teaching website was set up by the EMS Teaching Specialist Team.

## 6. Leadership theory as a theoretical lens

It is necessary to consider theory on leadership styles to think through and reflect on how we managed the rapid change and moved from survivalist actions to more systemic adjustments in a new and uncertain reality. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) argue that to support the campus collective in pivoting to remote learning, academic leaders must use a new toolbox of intellectual stimulation, idealised influence and inspiration while providing essential training, support and resources to faculty suddenly immersed in online teaching. In particular, Fernandez and Shaw (2020) emphasise three characteristics leaders require to cope well with rapid and unpredictable changes in academia. These characteristics clearly connect with people, distributing leadership and communicating.

The first aspect, which can also be described as servant leadership, emphasises empowerment, involvement and collaboration, and placing the interests of others above the leadership's own interests. This view is reinforced by Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021: 208) who emphasise relinquishing control and collective leadership, along with caring, empathy and compassion, as important for leadership during crisis conditions. These views speak to the importance of emotional intelligence in academic leaders. Building relationships and establishing mutual trust in a crisis is not easy and requires of academic leaders to be

authentic and engage in active listening without judgement, accept advice and criticism, and communicate their views transparently by speaking from the heart while promoting psychological safety. Nugroho *et al.* (2021) emphasise that once empathy is developed, it leads to more conducive work environments and improved productivity.

Secondly, academic leaders should distribute leadership responsibilities to a network of teams to improve the quality of decisions made. This aspect is crucial in a crisis situation. Kerr and Jermier (1978) concur that a distributed leadership style promotes collaboration and inclusivity and works particularly well in academia where followers are motivated, knowledgeable and experienced. Moreover, John and Srivastava (1999) argue that when it comes to building teams, selecting team or task force members and delegating responsibilities to these members, five important traits are considered, namely openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, diversity and cultural differences.

Thirdly, leaders should communicate regularly and clearly through various communication channels to all stakeholders, such as colleagues, students and parents. Leadership should also consider stakeholder preferences; thus, communication with employees and students may utilise different channels. Effective communication is linked to the integrity and credibility of the leader; if the leader is not credible, the message communicated will not be perceived as credible.

Thus, empathy, devolution of responsibilities and clear regular communication emerged as important leadership traits during the COVID-19 pandemic. As we were coping with the unfolding crisis, we did not have time to consult theory. However, now that we are moving towards a “new normal”, and with the benefit of hindsight, we can pose questions to ourselves and think critically about our decisions.

## 7. Our experiences of running departments under the COVID-19 crisis

We now explore how we managed the rapid change and moved from survivalist actions to more systemic adjustments in a new and uncertain reality. We examine the complexity behind some of the processes and reflect both on our experiences and decision-making processes, including the importance of lobbying and networking, given the realisation that many futures were at risk. We also draw out the key principles that guided these decisions, such as pragmatism, empathy and simplicity.

Our challenges included dealing with large classes in an online environment where students needed to be taught practical content according to the standards of professional bodies, teaching research methodology and ensuring that continued quality supervision was provided to postgraduate students. This needed to be done within a context of significant difficulties, given the profile of the student population and compromised staff well-being. Many students had to leave their residences to return home which, in many cases, were in rural areas or informal settlements. The issues facing other institutions, such as unstable internet connections, home environments not being conducive to learning, and a high proportion of undergraduate students not having their personal computers or laptops, also affected our students. Tutors reported that they struggled to get hold of students in their groups. Additionally, some students (and staff) struggled to use iKamva, especially the more advanced teaching and assessment tools.

All four writers had a physical open-door policy prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. Students knew that they could walk into our offices, which provided a particular benefit for postgraduate students. Supervision requires an ongoing relationship with students. This ended abruptly with the onset of the hard lockdown. Additionally, primary data collection in the traditional sense became problematic. This affected Master's and Doctoral students who needed to collect data via fieldwork. Teaching research methodology required innovation and some difficult decisions. We had to face the realities that our students faced far more directly than we had before. The teaching of research methodology was another area that was affected. For example, the teaching of Stata (a quantitative statistics software package) was removed from the ISD's teaching programme after careful consideration relating to the fact that students would not have access to a computer laboratory and that attempting to take students through a complex quantitative project would be extremely difficult and unfair to students from working communities who lack access to computers and reliable internet access.

We found that our students need face-to-face engagement where they can interact with their lecturers and tutors in a physical space. The switch to a virtual mode of delivery was extremely hard for the numerous reasons outlined above. Students who enjoyed being in class suddenly had to be off-campus for more than a year and they felt the isolation. Students with patchy and unreliable connectivity ended up cutting in and out of the class and had to contend with noisy environments. In one instance, a student in class indicated that he was walking around in an informal settlement, having borrowed a phone to log in.

In terms of teaching and learning, more regular use was made of social media tools to facilitate small-group contact with students, for example, each tutor created a WhatsApp group along with Google Meet and Zoom to consult and supervise students. Lecturers also created pre-recorded lecture videos and audio files. All module coordinators and students were now required to use the university's learning management platform, iKamva. We relied on iKamva's visit statistics tool to determine whether students needed additional support. We all realised that we had been underutilising iKamva teaching tools and quickly upskilled ourselves and arranged additional staff training. Where some staff had difficulty adapting, they were provided with support from colleagues who were more adept in using e-tools. A benefit of this was that where pre-recorded videos were used, students could return to the content and refresh their knowledge.

Collecting data for decision-making purposes and communicating was a massive challenge for us. As part of making evidence-based decisions, we were asked by our executive management to provide data on the circumstances and needs of our students. We collected the data from students and various colleagues and felt it was essential to report back to colleagues (to the extent that we could). In addition to requests for data, we were inundated with queries and emails from students who shared with us what they were facing and how difficult it was for them. Furthermore, we needed to receive and make sense of constant communication received via various channels. We also needed to translate and communicate this information to staff and students clearly. This was time consuming, because the messages required to be well-thought through. The scale of communication also increased. We needed more tools to provide regular contact with the aid of a wide range of communication and online tools. As middle managers, we felt pressure, because we needed to communicate with staff and students from our home units, but also have frequent contact with faculty-level staff (that is, the Management Committee [MANCO], Deans, Deputy Deans and Faculty Managers)

and institutional level (e.g. Deputy Vice-Chancellors) leadership. WhatsApp played a critical role in this regard. Each department had its own staff WhatsApp group to communicate with staff. Additionally, a number of additional WhatsApp groups were created to deal with specific issues such as postgraduate management, module management and tutorial groups.

Middle managers were not only delegated crucial leadership tasks from the upper level but also needed to delegate tasks to the home unit's staff as leaders. We had to make decisions and account for those decisions, but we also had to wait for institutional direction and directives. Extensive strategic and operational meetings and discussions preceded communications. Whereas in the pre-COVID era, we would give lecturers autonomy to manage their modules and systems were well known to all, under COVID-19 this changed. We were no longer primarily accountable for oversight – we were accountable for everything. This meant instantly dealing with a myriad of issues and challenges while operating in a bizarre and frightening space. We had our own anxieties and personal challenges, but needed to rethink all operations urgently, put feasible plans in place and get them up and running. To do so, we had to make decisions about where to cut back and what remained critical. One of us developed a “to don't list”, declining all speaking engagements and was unable to publish since the beginning of the pandemic. Another cut back on her teaching to focus solely on administration and running the department. Of course, the situation enabled some lecturing staff to increase their research output, and the scholarly study of the impact of COVID-19 contributed to this. Shared drives were used to create repositories of valuable documents and facilitate collective work that would ordinarily have been done in person.

Departmental chairs had to engage intensively with all lecturers about every module to develop contingency plans. This then needed to be fed back to departmental staff to ensure consistency between modules, particularly at the year levels. The need for strong administrative systems and contingency plans became very clear. We continuously addressed problems as they emerged and tried to find solutions to issues we did not always have answers to. Designing an entirely new mode of delivery for all levels of study would, under normal circumstances, be a challenging endeavour requiring months of planning, testing and refinement. Indeed, it requires out-of-the-box thinking – the kind of thinking, creativity and reflection that occurs through face-to-face brainstorming and workshopping. The complete reimagining of all modules without the benefit of time and under virtual conditions while replicating the same educational outcomes was a colossal challenge. This was exacerbated by the fact that we operate in a very participative way – engagement with and between students is key to student learning. We also had to reimagine the governance of our departments by revising workflow processes, administrative systems and reworking roles and responsibilities with stressed and overstretched staff.

These are the more technical aspects; however, we have to acknowledge our own personal shock and trauma of being custodians of the lives of our students and staff, who tried to cope with isolation, illness, sorrow, fear and instability. We, and our colleagues, were exhausted. Given the dire socio-economic situation most of our students faced, staff made tremendous sacrifices which came at a cost. For example, many students could only access data at night due to lowered costs, resulting in them sending their queries after hours. Staff responded to these queries because they understood the situation of their students. This exacerbated the already blurred boundaries between home and work life. The seemingly never-ending cycle of adapting to the changing environment took a toll on staff's mental and emotional wellness.

## 8. Key issues and learning that emerge

We now examine some of the processes and reflect both on our experiences and decision-making processes and the key learnings that emerge from these. As indicated by Fernandez and Shaw (2020), leaders need three key characteristics to deal with the unpredictable changes in academia – connecting with people, distributing leadership and communicating clearly. By implicitly drawing on these, our departments emerged from the crisis with some of our systems enhanced. This, and being decisive and pragmatic, is what enabled all four departments to stabilise and move out of a survivalist mode.

Connectedness is something that none of us struggles with. Certainly, we regard ourselves as empathetic leaders. In fact, this strength led us to lean on one another despite our disciplinary differences. We assisted one another with the barrage of requests for data, documentation and operational advice. That connectedness has led to us collaborating in the writing of this article. While there is no downside to clear distributed leadership and clear regular communication, there is undoubtedly a downside to being too connected and empathetic. There is a need for healthy boundaries to prevent burnout. Nevertheless, given the extraordinary situation, we feel our sacrifices were warranted, and we are not sorry for having walked the path we did. We operated under the realisation that many futures were at risk. An essential finding is that peer support between middle managers is also important. Here four chairpersons from very different backgrounds provided one another with support. This shows that different academic units can collaborate. Is it possible that ‘multidisciplinary’ communication and cooperation could continue even after the pandemic is over?

In terms of distributing leadership, we hold the view that everyone is a leader in some way. They do not need a title or an explicit leadership role to lead and take responsibility. We tried to create structure and opportunities for leadership. This links to role clarity. Each role is vital, and there must be clarity around who needs to do what, because we depend on one another for tasks to be accomplished. While roles were previously either fully documented or understood, rather than documented, COVID-19 brought to the fore the importance of all staff having a clear understanding of their roles. There have been instances where staff either went beyond the scope of their role or did not fully embrace their role. This led to situations where others feel slighted because their “territory” has been stepped on. At the same time, initiative is needed when work “falls through the cracks”. As middle managers, we needed to ensure that there is clarity around tasks and responsibilities. We also needed to remind our teams about the importance of having synergy, accepting help and not being overly sensitive.

The middle manager is the central person that links students, lecturing staff, tutors, administrative staff, various divisions and units in the university, and executive management. Therefore, they must not only communicate regularly and with clarity to all these stakeholders but also oversee communication between them. A break in communication can have major repercussions. It is essential for all staff to be collegial in the way they speak to one another. Abruptness, which becomes distasteful, is a matter that we tried to eliminate because of the negative consequences it produces. When there was a communication breakdown between staff, we intervened as middle managers to remedy situations, so it did not degenerate. The reason for doing this was to avoid seemingly simple matters from escalating into an unnecessary crisis.

In South Africa, communication is made all the more challenging due to the issues around data and connectivity described above and the ongoing energy crisis characterised by loadshedding, where electrical power is switched off for hours at a time. In fact, not only is it switched off for hours at a time, but different geographic zones are switched off at different times; therefore it is impossible to find a time when everybody has their power on. It is therefore typical to have our cameras switched off during virtual meetings. Furthermore, while vaccinated staff have been permitted to return to campus, the exorbitant fuel and transport costs create a disincentive for face-to-face meetings.

We recognise that people with different personalities have different communication styles for engaging with people. However, we have consensus that there must be professionalism and respect underlying all communication – this is imperative so that even if we disagree with one another, it is done in a safe and respected space. This includes written communication. Middle managers take strain when communication between staff is tainted by power dynamics and/or disrespect because then we need to take on (an unnecessary) mediation role. Typically, the issue is not around the content being communicated, but the manner in which the communication occurs. It is for this reason that rules of engagement around communication become paramount.

Two clear patterns emerged from our reflections. Firstly, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing challenges and highlighted operational gaps and shortcomings. An example of this is how the impact of staff resignations was a challenge in the Accounting Department before the onset of COVID-19. During the lockdown, the impact of resignations was felt far more intensely. To begin with, the Accounting Department had challenges around retaining staff, because staff members are easily attracted to industry and/or other institutions offering more lucrative career options. The ISD had very limited staff and had its director seconded to a critical role elsewhere. The Political Studies Department has a small staff complement relative to the size of its student population, and several staff (including the chairperson) were involved in demanding institutional roles.

Additionally, two of the departments also had a challenge with a reluctance from staff in taking on the role of departmental chairperson. These staffing constraints were a challenge under normal circumstances. For a well-functioning department, it is critical to have a leader at professorial level offering clear direction where systems and processes are in place, and each member of staff has clarity about their role and responsibilities. The challenges outlined above had to be dealt with within the context of staffing constraints, which made the transition all the more difficult.

A second pattern was that there was simply no other option but to improve systems and processes. As Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021: 206) indicate, the pandemic required of us to “unlearn old behaviours, teaching, and philosophies, and relearn skills and attitudes from scratch”. The fundamental principles that emerge are the need for pragmatism, innovation and simplicity in guiding our decisions. The situation with the PDGA in Accounting provides useful lessons. The diploma is governed by SAICA. The first virtual exam had a very poor pass rate. As a result, interventions were implemented in collaboration with the e-learning team. This included appealing to university structures for additional assessments, providing students with additional support and devices and the use of specialised proctoring software. The university's Information and Communication Services (ICS) division assisted with laboratory space while laptops were couriered to students off-campus. The pass rate improved as a result of these

interventions, but it was clear that physical engagement and sit-down exams were important. As soon as it was possible, hybrid teaching was introduced and embraced by the Accounting students. Overseeing these interventions within the parameters of the university's governance processes and structures was a full-time task. In this regard, the department was forced to make quick but carefully calculated practical decisions to maintain its accreditation and the credibility of the degree. The chairperson had to lobby numerous stakeholders, locate resources and ensure that students were fully supported. New technology was harnessed, and students and staff had to be upskilled quickly.

## 9. Conclusion

We must continue asking difficult questions about the long-term implications of the profound changes, including the move to hybrid teaching, and how we can regain a proactive stance, facilitating directed, inclusive, long-term change where not only a select few benefit. As Rashid and Yadav (2020) assert, campus closures and the abrupt switch from face-to-face contact on campus to remote learning and teaching is only a small step in the long journey for tertiary institutions to offer online or hybrid education, with the aid of various student engagement tools and instructors' training.

In fact, they argue that improved digitisation of education most likely will become a norm post-pandemic. It is undeniable that both academics and students need to engage more with technology in this Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Therefore, we should not passively react to changes, but be prepared to be part of and drive these changes and proactively adapt our work manners and leadership styles to be more effective and efficient in executing work duties.

However, we need to go far beyond embracing the 4IR. More empirical research on the challenges of middle-level managers in academia is necessary, as this is clearly a research gap in the existing literature on Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. The role of the middle managers cannot be overlooked because they have been delegated new responsibilities and will play a more prominent leadership role. At the same time, middle managers must groom the lower-level staff and transform them into the next generation of leaders.

Finally, while the 'new normal' will become long-term normal in the years ahead, we can rest assured that as a nation and as academia, we will be dealing with the repercussions of COVID-19 over the next few years.

## Ethics statement

The participation of all contributors to this research article was voluntary.

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