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Teaching on the edge of chaos: Report on 'The future of universities in a post-COVID-19 world'

You might well ask, what more could or should be said about COVID-19? Don't we all have COVID-fatigue? Is it not clear that everything, not just universities, will change post-pandemic?

Yes, to all of these questions, but in this latest edition (number 5) of the ASSAf Presidential Roundtables on 'Science, Scholarship and Society', Professor Jonathan Jansen, ASSAf President and Distinguished Professor in Education (Stellenbosch University), chaired a lively, engaging and important discussion on 'The future of universities in a post-COVID-19 world'. The panel consisted of Professor Ruksana Osman (Deputy Vice Chancellor: Academic, University of the Witwatersrand), Professor Laura Czerniewiec (Director of the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching, University of Cape Town) and Mr Stafford Masie (General Manager of WeWork South Africa): two academics with backgrounds in pedagogy and teaching methods, and a technopreneur with a background in private education and entrepreneurship.

Universities are both barometers and leaders; they make visible the dynamics and tensions within society, and at the same time they influence the society of the future. It is broadly acknowledged that knowledge and power are inextricably linked, and if not knowledge and power, then certainly knowledge and agency.^{1,2} A university education strengthens individual capability, allowing graduates to participate more actively in public life, and to reap the benefits of social and economic freedoms that accompany such agency. The future of universities is, therefore, an important question. As articulated by Walker³, 'the choices we make about higher education are also choices about what kind of society we wish to build'.

Universities perform a diverse set of functions, including teaching, research and community outreach. The panel discussions, however, focused almost exclusively on the teaching function, with specific attention to *how* modules are taught, rather than *what* is taught. In particular, panel members presented their views on the longer-term implications of digital technologies, the use of which has been accelerated by the pandemic, on pedagogy or teaching method.

This scope was outlined by Jansen, whose introduction noted that the campus closure due to COVID-19 was not a unique event. For instance, the #FeesMustFall period had already catalysed the adoption of online learning techniques and the development of infrastructure necessary for students to complete their courses without having to attend lectures or tutorials. However, the disruptions due to COVID-19, accompanied by the growing viability of alternatives to conventional teaching methods, were unprecedented in his view, incubating three important questions which he posed to the panel: 'Is the brick and mortar university, where students have a social and educational experience, a thing of the past? Does this mean the end of the lower tier universities? Is this the end of the residential university?'

All three panellists agreed that this was a pivotal moment presenting significant challenges and requiring innovative responses and solutions, developed collaboratively across disciplines and sectors. Face-to-face tuition, delivered through lectures (this format is called synchronous learning), is no longer the baseline; new approaches are required. But exactly what solutions, and what dangers to avoid, were widely dissimilar and provided the real interest of the discussions.

Learning moments and game changers for teaching practice

In her presentation, Professor Osman listed her top three learning points from the pandemic: it has highlighted the failure of South Africa's development project (broadly conceptualised as extending access to higher education across race, class and gender); it has aggravated the high pressure of the academic environment which is eroding the possibility of a work-life balance; and it has shown that both faster communication and shorter decision-making is possible (silos can be crumbled!).

In her view, the pivotal moment of COVID-19 is the need to rethink teaching practice (pedagogy), and hence revise the way in which teachers are educated. With her professional background in education, it is not surprising that pedagogy was the focus of her talk. She observed that we need to 'rethink teaching practice, develop approaches which support learning without the need to attend lectures, deepen professional practice and change the way in which we train teachers'. Osman also raised the question as to whether online resources could include material from top tier universities, supporting the 'equalisation of knowledge practices'.

In summarising, she noted that COVID-19 offers the opportunity to explore alternatives. It is not one or the other, but blended approaches that will be important. Moreover, she stressed that we need to continue the traditions of collegiality and collaboration as the core of our approaches to the development of those alternatives.

Gramsci, social justice and open education

Professor Czerniewiec raised an entirely different set of issues, informed mainly by her concern over the marketisation of higher education. Quoting Gramsci's renowned saying 'I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will', she described the COVID-19 moment as 'teaching on the edge of chaos' and facing a future that 'no-one knows what it will look like'. Although the transition might appear as a phased move to online education, in fact it is an emergency response to the collapse of campus-based teaching.

Admitting that she might be accused of adopting a dystopian, apocalyptic perspective, she declared that big capital's initiatives in the sector are undermining the public good characteristic of higher education. The combination of



marketisation – the trend whereby universities are encouraged to act like private businesses rather than public institutions – and budget cuts had threatened the value and existence of public education, particularly in the USA (see [recession_reality.com](https://www.recession-reality.com)) – a trend which would further entrench inequality and weaken the values of social justice.

Czerniewiec noted that the pandemic had been a gift to companies that offered online higher education and teaching tools, generating new billionaires and multibillion-dollar corporations, including the likes of Zoom and Turnitin. The advent of surveillance capitalism had invaded personal lives and rights to privacy, allowing technology to digitise human behaviour and enable unethical profit-seeking. In her view, the problem was not technology per se, but the business models within which it was being applied.

On the optimistic side of the Gramsci quote, Czerniewiec observed that digital technologies will support blended approaches to learning and enrich such experiences. She considered that the tension between technology, education, equality and social justice has become a wicked problem which will require a multidisciplinary effort to understand and resolve. She stressed that South Africa has an almost unique perspective in the sense that our education policies had retained imperatives for the attainment of social justice. Many countries had already abandoned such values in favour of a strictly instrumental view of higher education (its value lies only in the extent to which the educated are able to contribute economically).

Finally, Czerniewiec considered that we now have the opportunity to build high-quality online and blended learning materials, and especially to adopt open education as the dominant practice, resonating with the earlier call by Osman to improve access. However, such perspectives on open education and the danger of surveillance capitalism were not shared by the final speaker on the panel, Mr Stafford Masie, the General Manager of WeWork South Africa, who stridently challenged the public good sentiments presented by the previous speakers.

Big tech will deliver a ‘record label moment’ to higher education

Masie began with the statement ‘I love listening to academics talking about their universities’, and then proceeded to ignore or demolish their arguments. Labelling academics and their institutions (public universities) as short sighted, resistant to change, and unaware of broader trends, his criticisms were explicit and unambiguous. Referring to the impact of COVID-19 on education, he noted that ‘this is going to be massive ... this is going to be a reboot of education’. The pandemic is accelerating everything, and he saw the universities as being in denial.

Informed by his entrepreneurial and technology-rich background, Masie declared that the pandemic had ‘laid the university model bare’ and that this was their ‘record label moment’ (the latter refers to the failure of record companies to acknowledge and hence respond to the threat of digital streaming on their core business model). The COVID-19 shock had forced parents and scholars to evaluate alternatives to conventional practices including working from home, online teaching, online retail and other services.

More profoundly, these experiences, he believed, had led many parents and students to realise that the cost of formal education was ‘not worth it’. Even if their initial experiences of such platforms had been disappointing, Masie stressed that the universities should not underestimate the power of entrepreneurs to fill the gaps. He warned complacent academics that big tech is ‘on the doorstep’ and that big tech companies such as Google and Apple were targeting education and health care as new business areas. By injecting higher education with cognition and thinking in a

skeuomorphic way, technology-based companies could replace public higher education with online learning platforms.

Masie is clearly a proponent of disruptive change – hoping perhaps that his strong opinions on the present model for higher education will be performative and lead to the opportunities that he outlined. In his final remarks, he expressed a more collaborative proposal, in which he outlined the importance of co-creation, and a new architecture for developing solutions, allowing non-education sector participants in addition to the existing incumbents. ‘Only the whole of humanity can solve the problem.’

This report attempts to convey the intensity of the discussions, with substantial differences in opinion on how higher education can, or will be, forced to respond to the COVID-19 disruption of its teaching activities. All presenters agreed, not surprisingly, that this is a pivotal moment – which presents both a threat and an opportunity. The opportunity, in their view, lies in transforming the baseline for teaching from the face-to-face synchronous approaches of the past, to asynchronous, blended and active learning, which were not specifically detailed but indirectly noted as necessary additions to present teaching practices and designs.

The panel’s differences in opinion, however, were profound and reminiscent of the conceptual frameworks widely used in the field of transition studies, and particularly the insights of the multi-level perspective.^{4,5} This perspective states that opportunities arise when an exogenous event (in this case, COVID-19) destabilises the landscape, which, in turn, weakens the dominance of the existing socio-technical regime (in this case, the public universities). At such moments, niche actors (in this case, the educational entrepreneurs) can successfully challenge the regime and become dominant.

Given the strong arguments in favour of higher education as a public good⁶, and as a means of rebuilding social justice, the demise of public universities would be an undesirable outcome for South Africa. The market would be unlikely to respect the plea for a pedagogy of engagement which goes beyond both physical and epistemological borders, as made by Osman in her closing remarks. Neither would it be concerned about the historical goal for education as a means of raising public good overall, rather than to increase the access of one group at the expense of another. It may be that we, as academics, are indeed ‘teaching on the edge of chaos’ in Czerniewiec’s words, but it is critical that this chaos does not degenerate into Masie’s ‘record label moment’. At this point, we should be reminded of another of Gramsci’s quotes: ‘The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters.’

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