

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Student Affairs Practitioners: A Reflective Case Study from Bindura University of Science Education in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on faculty and student affairs practitioners which has changed the future of higher education worldwide. This reflective practitioner account looks into its impact on practitioners working in student affairs, some of which is not immediately visible, but unfortunately very significant and will surface in the medium and long term. There has been tremendous uncertainty for Student Affairs practitioners as a result of disruption from familiar routines and unexpected disengagement with their clients, the students. The change management perspective and scholarship of practice were adopted as methods of observing how a department in a university deals with unplanned change. The study concluded that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted practitioners negatively at the case university as new skills were required, practitioners were required to adjust to new work arrangements, lost income, suffered mental health problems and faced resource constraints. Training and development, social media, employee support systems and employee incentives were catalysts in the early adoption of change.

Keywords

change models; Covid-19; higher education; scholarship of practice; Student Affairs

Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to knowledge sharing with regard to the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on student affairs practitioners and their practice in general. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020. On 11 March, WHO declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. This new reality presented both opportunities and challenges for higher education institutions (HEIs) and student affairs practitioners in particular. The Government of Zimbabwe declared the Covid-19 pandemic a national disaster on 17 March 2020. This pronouncement was followed by a national lockdown which

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commenced on 30 March 2020. The national lockdown imposed several restrictions which impacted on learning and the implementation of campus activities on one hand while on the other hand prompted the HEIs to join hands with other progressive organisations in coming up with strategies for containing the virus in Zimbabwe. The lockdown instituted in March 2020, was preceded by a closure of all primary, secondary and higher education institutions of learning in a bid to stem the rapid spread of Covid-19. The closure created a 'new normal' for the students who had to learn online for a prolonged period.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic shook almost all (HEIs) globally, and Zimbabwe was no exception, coupled with the need to migrate from face-to-face to eLearning. There was no budget in place to support the retraining of human capital and retooling of services to support online learning. The switch-over to eLearning by universities was received with mixed feelings by students who were happy that in spite of the closure of campuses they could still continue with their education, but the major challenge was that they could not afford data bundles to access the new mode of learning. These challenges also reverberated at the case institution, Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE).

Like in other institutions, student affairs professionals at the institution under reflection had to grapple with managing the sudden change in their immense schedules as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This reflective article aims at providing insights into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student affairs professionals at Bindura University of Science Education in Zimbabwe. It applies scholarship of practice as its methodology for contextualising the impact of the coronavirus on student affairs practitioners (Luescher, 2018).

The basic argument of this article is based on the principle of disruptive change and argues that student affairs practitioners were forced to deal with sudden change in executing their work. It is therefore pertinent to outline that some change models will be applied in analysing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student affairs practitioners. This article employed two change management models which were developed by Kurt Lewin (1951) and John Kotter (2008) based on the experiences of student affairs practitioners at the case university.

Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by Kurt Lewin and John Potter's change management models which outline how organisational change efforts can be planned, organised and managed (McGrath & Bates, 2017; Kotter & Cohen, 2014). Lewin's change model is characterised by three stages namely: unfreezing, changing and refreezing (Banhegyi & Banhegyi, 2007; McGrath & Bates, 2017). John Kotter used the work of Kurt Lewin to develop an eight-step model of the change management process, arguing that neglecting any of the steps can be enough for the whole initiative to fail (Kotter, 2008; Kotter & Cohen, 2014). The model is illustrated and summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: John Kotter's change model

Step	Management Activity
Create urgency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating awareness for the need for change. • Creating a forum to generate conversation of what is happening. • Seeking management buy-in.
Form a powerful coalition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form change team to help you. • Observe team expertise and diversity. • Delegate tasks organisation-wide.
Create a vision for change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make an inspirational vision
Communicate the vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sell the vision throughout the organisation. • Continuously communicate the message.
Remove obstacles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify individuals, traditions, legislation that become obstacles and setbacks. • Apply resources to break obstacles and setbacks.
Create short wins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify low-hanging fruits. • Set short- to medium-term targets and goals. • Provide change motivation and direction.
Build on the change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustain and cement the change. • Keep setting goals for continued improvement.
Cement change in corporate culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make change part of the core of your organisation. • Keep senior stakeholders on board. • Encourage new employees to adopt the changes. • Celebrate individuals who successfully adopt the change.

Source: Kotter & Cohen, 2014

While Lewin's model was created with reference to change in general, Kotter's model was designed with organisational change in mind (Smith, 2018). Using the example of an ice cube Lewin (1951) shows that if one intends to change it into a cone, the first step is to unfreeze it to make it amenable to change (**unfreezing**), then mould the melted water into a **cone** (**changing**) and finally solidify the new shape which has been created (**refreezing**). The main tenets of the model are discussed briefly below.

Unfreezing

The first stage of change, according to Lewin, involves changing the status quo and preparing people in an organisation for change. In order to succeed, change leaders need to challenge existing beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours and develop an understanding of the new ways of operating in the people. Expanding on Lewin's model (McGrath & Bates, 2017) observe that this stage is the most important and difficult stage since it often puts people off-balance and change leaders need to get the necessary buy-in (Kotter, 2008; Kotter & Cohen, 2014).

Changing

Before embracing change, people need to understand how they would benefit from it. People embrace change at different rates and to varying degrees (Rogers, 2003). The “change curve” as illustrated below shows the experiences of people as they undergo change.

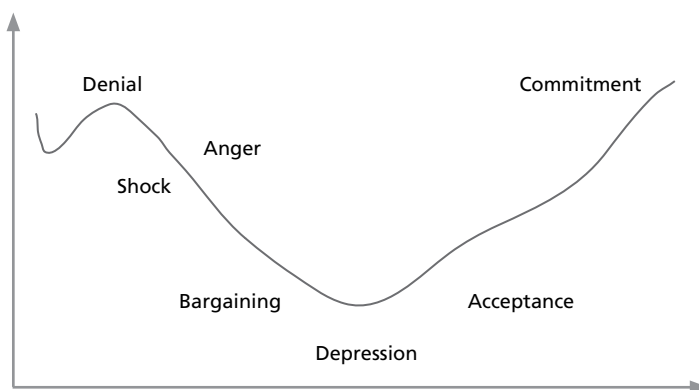


Figure 1: The change curve showing the various stages and experiences of change assimilation
(Source: <https://www.educational-business-articles.com>)

Developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (Malone, 2018), the change curve illustrates that people pass through three stages of change which encompass: shock and denial; depression and anger; and acceptance and commitment. Indeed there was a need to manage these changes within students and staff at the case university who felt the changes were drastic and unmanageable since they had not been prepared for such. People thought it was impossible to do business online – worse still to provide student support online. For students, there was an atmosphere of anxiety over the pending separation from their learning communities. There were also angry sentiments from students who felt that the institution was not being fair to migrate to online classes without providing them with cheaper data and the opportunity to get acquainted with the new modes of delivery. It was important that this change be managed for the institution to move on and manage within the new normal.

Refreezing

Refreezing takes place when people have embraced the change and adopted new ways of practice. This stage helps practitioners to internalise and institutionalise the change. Refreezing ensures that change applies to all situations in the work arena and that new ways are used continuously without reverting back to old systems. Based on these thoughts, staff and students at the case university will gradually accept new ways of learning and working as a result of the changes introduced in light of the pandemic. Use of both models as a conceptual framework will give the change initiatives the best chance of success and a form of triangulation (Smith, 2018).

Methodology

Reflective scholarship of practice in student affairs

This article employed an experiential insight design in which the researchers describe their experiences in terms of how they experienced the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic at BUSE. Experiential insight approach is a paradigm for the study of people's experiences of a particular phenomenon (Grant, Gilmore, Carson & Pickett, 2001). This approach allows the researcher to describe their experiences in the context of placing themselves in situations (Grant et al., 2001). In the context of this study the researchers were members of the BUSE Covid-19 Response Committee. The Committee was set up to guide the institution's response, prevention and control of the pandemic. Luescher (2018) argues that a scholarly reflection on the experiences of students and staff at a university helps in the production of knowledge that sharpens the competencies of student affairs practitioners in the craft of their practice. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic needs to be nuanced through a reflective scholarship that critically captures their experiences at national and international levels. This was the major factor which determined our choice of a theoretical frame to guide the methodology of this research. The methodology is also grounded in Luescher's (2018) assertion that the development of scholarship of practice in student affairs entails gathering data that is comprehensive in African contexts. For the purpose of this research, data were collected through observations and documents relating to the activities of the Covid-19 Response Taskforce at the case university. This perspective clearly dovetails with our objective in this reflective article which seeks to facilitate the development and growth of knowledge that empowers student affairs practitioners in the practice of their work. Expanding on this framework, Luescher (2018, pp. 67-68) identifies the following critical elements that are crucial to scholarship of practice:

1. "A scholarship of practice in student affairs deals with problems that are meaningful to practitioners and that practitioners can experientially relate to; it understands practice as action, as performance, as a deliberate, skilled way of doing things" (Luescher, 2018, p. 67).

This observation merges well with our experiential discussion and evaluation of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student affairs practitioners and the application of change management theories as a response strategy.

2. "It studies practice in a scholarly manner that is intentional and part of a process of learning, which is academically rigorous and systematic, that results in trustworthy accounts, analyses and interpretations" (Luescher, 2018, p. 67).

The authors used secondary research to augment experiential insights through observations and conversational approaches through social media platforms that enabled them to capture rich and authentic feedback from respondents in order to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in their area of work. Secondary research was done through records of meetings and internal and external communications.

3. Conversational approaches help capture sincere feedback with deeper meaning and understanding than traditional research methods that tend to make people rationalise and overly rely on recall in their responses to understanding phenomena (Reach, 2020).

Research questions

In order to put this methodological frame into context and also drawing on Morgan (2012) cited in Luescher (2018)'s template, we asked the following questions to guide this reflective study.

- (i) What were the experiences of the student affairs practitioners caused by the Covid-19 pandemic?
- (ii) What problems or opportunities were encountered?
- (iii) How did the change process unfold and what strategies were employed to deal with the situation?
- (iv) What were the outcomes?

This article was therefore developed on the grounding of this methodological template and related methods which were informed by the experiential insights of the authors. In our application of the scholarship of practice methodology, we employed some models of organisational change to reflect on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our practice in student affairs at the case university. Kurt Lewin (1951)'s and John Potter (2008)'s change management models were found fit for purpose for this reflective article.

Data collection methods

Data for this study was collected through document analysis of the following documents: minutes of the student affairs board; minutes of the student affairs management committee; minutes of the Covid-19 task force, Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development circulars on the Covid-19 pandemic; the student affairs strategic plan and the Dean of Students' fortnightly report to the University Senior Administrators Committee meetings. Participant observation of what took place before, during and after the outbreak of the pandemic and the experiences of the authors constituted another data-gathering technique for the study. Informal interviews with the participants in the change process yielded important information which helped shape the course of the change programme and the findings of this study.

The Case University

Bindura University of Science Education, a medium-sized university in Zimbabwe with a student population of slightly more than 7000 was chosen as the case university. Although there was nothing special about this university being chosen as the case university, the researchers felt that the account would come out clearly if conducted where all three authors worked and also that state universities in Zimbabwe resembled a more or less similar structural organisation and circumstance. The institution was born out of the

Zimbabwe–Cuba Science Teacher Training Programme in which Zimbabwean Mathematics and Science teachers were formerly trained in the Republic of Cuba. In the year 1996, the programme was devolved to Zimbabwe and resulted in the establishment of a University College under the University of Zimbabwe, culminating in the establishment of Bindura University of Science Education in the year 2000, with a mandate to train Mathematics and Science teachers for the nation and the SADC region at large. The institution has five faculties namely: Agriculture and Environmental Science; Commerce; Science and Engineering; Science Education; and Social Sciences and Humanities (www.buse.ac.zw).

Student Affairs at the case university

The Student Affairs division at this university is headed by the Dean of Students who reports directly to the Vice-Chancellor. Reporting to the Dean of Students are various heads of sections who manage the functional areas in Student Affairs. These are Campus Life and Student Development Programmes, Student Health and Wellness, Chaplaincy and Ecumenical Services, Financial Aid, Catering Services, Counselling Services, Accommodation Services and Sports and Recreation (www.buse.ac.zw). The structural organisation of Student Affairs' functional areas at this institution does not differ much from what obtains elsewhere in Africa and the rest of the world (Leuscher, 2018; Kuk & Banning, 2009). One would notice that the organisation of Student Affairs at the case university conforms to international best practice, hence the reflection will also compare favourably with practices elsewhere. The department's mandate is to offer a co-curriculum which would enhance the students' gradueness, citizenship skills and employability, and to offer psycho-social support to students (BUSE, *Strategic Plan 2019-2023*). These programmes fall under the various sections mentioned above. Like in other institutions, Student Affairs professionals at the institution under reflection had to grapple with managing the sudden change in their immense schedules as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This reflective article aims at providing insights into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Student Affairs professionals and students at Bindura University of Science Education in Zimbabwe. It applies scholarship of practice as its methodology of contextualising the impact of the coronavirus on student affairs practitioners (Luescher et al., 2013).

Conceptualising the Change Programme

The argument of this article is based on the principle of disruptive change and argues that student affairs practitioners and students were forced to deal with sudden change which abruptly redirected the course and nature of their work. Following communication from the parent ministry, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development to all state universities to institute measures to combat the spread of the Covid-19 virus, a University Senior Administrators meeting was held at the case university via the ZOOM platform to map the way forward. Resolutions of the meeting were that each department was to come up with plans on how they were going to migrate from a physical to a virtual campus and embrace the new normal since the physical space

of the university was going to be closed indefinitely. The Vice-Chancellor who chaired the meeting emphasised that the university had not closed; hence learning and student support programmes had to continue through online delivery modes. The Dean of Students who was also a member of the Committee was assigned the task of driving change in his department, Student Affairs.

Implementing the Change Programme

Stage One: Changing the status quo

Armed with the Vice-Chancellor's mandate to drive change in his department and ensure that all staff in the department embrace the new normal, the Dean of Students embarked on an ambitious project code named 'Campus Wise Culture' and borrowed from Kurt Lewin and John Kotter's change management models which state that, in order to successfully implement change, one has to change the status quo first (Kotter & Cohen, 2014). This initial stage dovetailed with Lewin's unfreezing stage and Kotter's first four principles or stages namely: create urgency; form a powerful coalition; create a vision for change; and remove obstacles. In this regard, the Dean of Students started by pointing out where the department was and where it intended to be. In order to create understanding on the direction and form of change, the Dean of Students created a WhatsApp platform for all practitioners working in student affairs to talk about what was happening and the way forward. This platform helped the Dean of Students to identify innovators and early adopters whom he appointed to spearhead the change process. This is supported by Kotter and Cohen (2014) who advocate for the creation of a forum to generate a discussion on what obtains on the ground and to map the way forward. The change agents appointed, campaigned for the required change, and provided feedback to the change leaders via social media. A change leaders' team was formed using representatives nominated by sections and student clubs and societies and were representative of the whole student affairs spectrum including gender, age, educational level, faculties, clubs, societies, sport codes and the differentially abled groups. Other members with expertise such as student health personnel and the Senior Chaplain were appointed to the team. The Dean of Students was required to report progress to the University Executive meetings which were held fortnightly. The change effort was code-named "**Campus Culture Wise**" to make it catchy and compelling. Sub-themes were developed which made for easier understanding throughout the department and also brought relevance to each section and level of staff. Members were asked to forward their training needs so that they could be incorporated into the training programmes being developed. The change message contained information on being "**Campus Culture Wise**", which educated all members to maintain social distancing, cough into the elbow, wear face masks correctly all the time, wash hands regularly, sanitise hands, clean surfaces regularly and, most importantly, embrace technology. This messages were communicated regularly by the Department of Public Relations and Protocol through staff's and students' email, social media platforms and public notice boards in various official languages.

Stage Two: The change process

After the Dean of Students and his team were satisfied that members had been adequately prepared for change, they embarked on the process of incremental change in which they introduced the desired change in stages. During this stage of changing, data were collected on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on practitioners working in Student Affairs. This change process dovetailed with Lewin (1951)'s changing stage and Kotter (1988)'s stages 5 to 7 namely: remove obstacles; create short-term wins and build on the change. At this stage, members were required to embrace the new normal without fail. The proper wearing of masks, social distancing, regular washing of hands, working from home arrangements, virtual meetings, virtual student support and student development programmes and online student orientation programmes were introduced amongst others. Positive and negative reinforcement measures were taken according to Bandura (2001) for those who either complied or failed to adhere to the requirements. Teams were formed for monitoring and peer support in order to escalate the adoption of the new normal. The changing stage was the most difficult as members found it difficult to let go long-held habits and ways of doing things. It was also interesting to note that members of staff did not all change at once, since some quickly embraced the change while others took time and pain to adjust accordingly as observed by Rogers (2003) that in any change effort, there are innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards. It was noted that students and younger workers were more amenable to change than older and more experienced practitioners since they were more computer illiterate and less adventurous in using modern gadgets and software applications.

Stage Three: Refreezing/cementing change in corporate culture

Once change had taken place, the Dean of Students and his team introduced measures to ensure that student affairs practitioners and students did not revert back to their old ways of doing things. These measures included the scheduling of virtual meetings on a weekly basis; requiring that each section designs and presents a virtual programme for students; and that registers of students who attend these virtual webinars be maintained as a way of enforcing attendance by students; going paperless and other strategies.

Reflections on the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Data gathered through the analysis of key documents, participant observation, and informal interviews with the practitioners and the authors' experiential insights were analysed using thematic analysis which, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is generated through a close analysis of the findings in order to see existing patterns in the data. The following themes were identified from the data namely: modes of delivery; staff meetings; student support services; staff well-being; allocation and utilisation of resources; and lack of knowledge and information. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is brought out through a comparison between the students' and staff's experiences during the pre-Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 era.

Modes of delivery

Findings showed that, during the pre-Covid-19 era Student Affairs practitioners and students had been used to a physical campus, classroom-based student development and psycho-social support, and on-campus student orientation programmes. The Covid-19 era required them to utilise virtual modes of delivery where student development, psycho-social support and orientation programmes would be delivered online. This impacted them negatively as they lacked the skills, knowledge, experience, and confidence in managing virtual campuses, including delivering through online modes of learning, leading to fear, anxiety, anger, depression and later on acceptance. This culminated in the initial resistance to change as practitioners and students felt threatened by the change.

Staff meetings

During the pre-Covid-19 era, staff and students had been used to venue-based departmental and other meetings. The new normal demanded a new set of skills and tools. Most practitioners were caught off-guard since they did not have the requisite computer literacy levels coupled with a lack of either laptops or smartphones which were compatible with virtual meeting applications. Students were better placed in this regard as they were more computer literate than staff and possessed the required gadgets. Both students and staff required training in the scheduling and hosting of meetings on virtual platforms and how to join scheduled meetings.

Offering student support services

News of high deaths rates in Europe and the rest of the world due to Covid-19 related complications and the proliferation of misleading information on social media instilled fear, anxiety and restlessness amongst students and staff. This created an increased demand for psycho-social and other forms of support on the part of staff and students. The lack of adequate and accurate information meant that the staff could not adequately support students and give them guidance. This state of affairs rendered the Student Affairs practitioners useless and helpless in addressing students' concerns on one hand. On the other hand, staff and students who had been used to classroom- and office-based programmes and services were called upon to offer them virtually. This threatened the confidentiality aspect of counselling, where the student counsellors were wary of the privacy of the student's location. One counsellor remarked: "How do I know if I am not counselling the whole clan out there? There are possibilities that other people could be listening in the background. I am just not comfortable with offering student counselling online."

Staff well-being

The pandemic had its greatest impact on the well-being of staff as they were forced to separate from their work colleagues during trying times which required massive collegial support and encouragement. New sets of job skills and knowledge were required, strange

working from home arrangements introduced, changing nature of jobs and the separation from students created a void in staff, leading to poor mental health and well-being. The de-skilling nature of Covid-19 imposed change that brought about a sense of job insecurity and some anxious moments for staff. This led to connectivity challenges if the practitioner had no internet connection at home. Practitioners in the sports and recreation section lost income due to the blanket ban on all sporting activities in the country as they were paid based on hours worked with students.

Allocation and utilisation of resources

The university's efforts to fight the pandemic meant that more resources were to be channelled towards that cause, leaving the budgeted-for student programmes without allocations. This had a negative impact on Student Affairs practitioners and even students in that they had to cancel some scheduled events and student development programmes. Relations between practitioners deteriorated as staff jostled for the few availed resources in the department, leading to low staff morale and work disengagement.

What Were the Major Outcomes?

The major outcomes were that continuous training and development enabled employees to change their attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and ways of doing work, leading to the successful adoption of change by the majority of practitioners as observed by Biech (2016), Vukotich (2011), Emerson and Stewart (2011), and Raina (2019) who all observed that training and development was a catalyst in change adoption and acceptance. Training and development provided by the Information and Communication Department was significant in that it empowered employees to embrace technology and accept change. Information given to employees through the social media eliminated employees' fears, anxiety, misconceptions, shock and depression (Lardi & Fuchs, 2013). These platforms enabled those employees who supported change to encourage others to embrace the change and provide feedback to change leaders. Employee support systems enhanced the quick adoption of change as students and practitioners' perceptions, concerns and fears were allayed, thereby reducing negative emotions amongst them. Professional incentives were also used as a catalyst for the quick adoption of organisational change as propounded by Worley and Lawler (2006) and Wruck (2000). Critical frontline personnel were incentivised through a Covid-19 allowance. These incentives worked as a catalyst for change adoption, and these practitioners in the department went the extra mile and sacrificed in the midst of risks.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This reflective article outlined the experiences of practitioners working in Student Affairs pre- and post the Covid-19 era. These findings showed that practitioners went through a rigorous change programme which helped them embrace the new normal. The study also showed that practitioners went through a process of loss of skills, isolation and separation from their work communities, grappled with new modes of presentation, loss of income for

some and constrained resource availability. The findings also showed that interventions such as training and development, employee support, use of social media and targeted incentives helped staff cope with the demands of the new normal induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. This article concludes that the Covid-19 pandemic had a generally negative impact on students and practitioners working in Student Affairs at the case university.

Based on the findings of this article, we therefore recommend that:

- Student Affairs practitioners be adequately resourced and capacitated in order to be able to effectively work from home.
- Student Affairs practitioners be developed in the use of online delivery modes in the same way academics are developed.
- University leaders are re-oriented to the important role played by Student Affairs in the psycho-social and cognitive development of students, so that they accord Student Affairs its rightful status.
- Lifelong learning opportunities for Student Affairs practitioners such as paid study leave and contact leave be availed.

Research Ethics

The case university where data were collected granted permission for this study to be conducted. All participants gave their informed consent and any identifying information such as names was kept confidential and anonymous.

Conflict of Interest and Funding

The authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial interests emanating from this study. No external funding was provided in order to carry out the study.

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