

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Student Affairs and Services Leadership in Trying Times: Student Social Behaviour Project and Psycho-social Support Interventions at a Comprehensive University in South Africa

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the lockdown measures that were widely implemented in response to the pandemic forced many of the forms of engagement and activities promoted by student affairs and services staff among students at universities to be curtailed or transformed – at first, so that they entailed no interpersonal contact and later so that they took place in line with health and safety protocols restricting contact. The moment of crisis required decisive, innovative leadership from members of staff as they sought to help meet the needs of students who were now deprived of the benefits of the psycho-social, intellectual and physical engagements that had been provided by in-person contact on highly interactive campuses. Accordingly, the student affairs and services staff at North-West University in South Africa collaborated with students, leveraging their creative potential to reach out, create and implement new student support systems and programmes through structured activities that could take place online and in the form of strictly controlled contact sessions. In this context, two new initiatives were established at the university: a student behaviour project which sought to deploy student peers to promote adherence to COVID-19 occupational health and safety protocols among the student population; and a raft of psycho-social support interventions, including webinars, cultural and sporting activities, and residence activities which promoted student welfare including by helping students to manage the realities of the pandemic more effectively. This reflective article, authored by two of the North-West University student affairs and services staff responsible for launching and leading these initiatives, considers the kinds of collaboration among university staff and with students that informed the establishment and implementation of these projects. Focusing particularly on how these projects may have contributed towards increased levels of social capital among the students at the university at a moment of crisis, with a view to extract lessons that may be learned for the proactive development of student-support measures under similar conditions in future.

Keywords

psycho-social support, social capital, student well-being, student social behaviour interventions, student affairs, student services leadership

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Introduction

More than a decade ago, scholar of biological psychiatry, Simon Young (2008) postulated that human beings are social beings who require social contact and relationship-building through which trusting, cooperative and deep meaningful connections are established. Conditions compelled by the recent advent of the COVID-19 pandemic which initially spread during 2020 have served almost as a test case on a global scale of this proposal, since one of the main limitations produced by the outbreak were restrictions on social interactions. These efforts to control social activities and movement were introduced in attempts to stem infections; the unforeseen by-products of which included causing social isolation, which in turn undermined the power of social capital as a means to achieve business objectives; manage crises; mobilise resources; and implement effective leadership (Wu, 2021). From a mental health perspective, there was a rise in anxiety and depressive symptoms and changes in sleeping patterns among the South African population (Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021) and among higher education students (Deng et al., 2021), as well as a rise in suicidal behaviour, frustration and impulsivity (Hossain et al., 2020). In response, there was a clear need for those in leadership to make and implement strong, compassionate and evidence-based decisions in an effort to halt the spread of the disease (Binagwaho, 2020) and curb the negative impacts produced by the pandemic and the necessary disease-prevention responses to it.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a particular challenge to higher education globally and in South Africa, including in relation to the viability of existing teaching and learning practices and efforts to support socialisation among students. The education system had to rethink and re-strategise how to achieve its main goals in the new environment and in the context of limited access to resources (Djidu et al., 2021); insufficient time to adjust its mode of implementation (Daniel, 2020); and human capital shortfalls caused by increasingly glaring socio-economic stressors, instability, and inequality. Poverty, limited access to electricity, limited online connectivity and a shortage of appropriate information and communications technology (ICT) devices made it difficult for the higher education system to execute its goals among the tertiary student population (Daniel, 2020).

One of the reasons that students attend university is to obtain an education which will enable them to make a significant contribution to society and the economy. At the same time, the teaching, learning, research and community engagement functions through which students acquire this education are underpinned by social interactions. In addition, there is a broad sense in which universities also function as a place where students can reach out to people outside of their immediate family and community structures (Botha & Kourkoutas, 2016; Neuwirth et al., 2021). In this regard, studies show that students not only focus on their academic goals and/or obtaining a qualification, they also have a need for student-life experiences, which may be enhanced by social bonding activities and mental-health initiatives provided by the student affairs and services (SAS) divisions of higher education institutions (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Inazu, 2018; Pfund et al., 2020).

A Malaysian study found that the academic frustrations experienced by students at the height of the lockdown were mostly attributed to the new mode of online education delivery that had been deployed (Sim et al., 2021). The students said that they felt overwhelmed and stressed by the way in which their academic workload was delivered online and further indicated that they struggled to maintain their concentration and focus when being taught online, compared with being taught in person (Sim et al., 2021). It was also found that some students lacked the self-discipline and motivation to follow through with self-study work; and that the available resources were not conducive for online learning (Sim et al., 2021). Similar studies in the context of South Africa (Dube, 2020; Joaquim et al., 2022; Mhlanga, 2021) have reported similar findings. Meanwhile, Aristovnik et al. (2020) and Wang et al. (2020), reporting on the influence of the pandemic on students' mental health globally and in the United States (US) respectively, noted that the students described experiencing unbearable psychological pressure and feelings of boredom, anxiety, frustration and hopelessness. The point here is to note the potential negative short-term and longer-term impacts of the pandemic and the institutional responses to it on students' education and mental health.

Many educational institutions and students refused to accept the status quo of the limiting, paralysing consequences and effects of the pandemic on them and demonstrated great resilience, creativity and innovation in the establishment and implementation of various social behavioural and psycho-social support interventions and activities that could improve their lot (Funda, 2022; Mahlaba, 2020; Mestry, 2022). The effective deployment of leadership and social capital were crucial to such solutions, interventions and alternative modes and kinds of activities (Shah et al., 2021), many of which were undertaken in the field of student affairs and services due to its centrality to the effective functioning of student life, education and development at university.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to describe and consider the processes, initiatives, and interventions that a comprehensive university in South Africa, North-West University (NWU), followed in its efforts to manage the impacts produced by COVID-19 and the lockdown restrictions implemented in response to the pandemic, with a specific focus on the social behavioural projects and psycho-social support interventions that were implemented to enhance the social capital of students and their well-being on campus from March 2020. The article highlights the leadership role played by student affairs and services staff and students in addressing the challenges that the university faced during this period; and also considers the lessons learned from these efforts.

Literature Review

Social capital

Humans have an inherent need to socialise and form part of a group or community with shared interests, hobbies, and passions (Harro, 2000). There is a need to share experiences and activities which produce individual memories and through which one

is seen as part of a complete system (Kovacheva & Lamberton, 2018). There is a need for well-grounded relationships and friendships as a basis of such shared experiences (Firth, 2008).

The philosopher Aristotle noted: “In poverty and other misfortunes of life, true friends are a sure refuge. They keep the young out of mischief; they comfort and aid the old in their weakness; and they incite those in the prime of life to noble deeds.” (Brannan & Mohr, 2022, p. 5).

Steadfast reciprocal relationships bring many benefits to the individual, ensuring that the person is tended to emotionally and/or that there is space provided in which one can talk about one’s frustrations and be exposed to others’ ideologies (Seeman, 1996). Valuable social and soft skills are developed and fostered in such relationships which offer a form of intimate accountability to someone else through which one’s own behaviour and actions, and the consequences thereof, may be deciphered (Marquart et al., 2021). Such accountability partnerships foster growth and progress towards shared and individual goals and make the tasks of life easier (Fuller, 2017).

In this context, the concept of “social capital” bears some consideration. Social capital, in its purest form, refers to “the by-product of social interactions that are embedded in and accessed via formal and informal social relationships with individuals, communities and institutions” (Hawkins & Maurer, 2012, p. 356). Social capital is a term used to describe the various networks through which people can establish meaningful connections and collaborative relationships (Pitas & Ehmer, 2020). Social capital is deployed and acquired through the development or establishment of social relations and ventures, which are beneficial and productive to all parties involved, fostering the achievement of collective goals. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 119) describe it as “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition”.

Social capital needs to be cultivated as it brings about many benefits. It can enable one to obtain valuable, reliable and current data and evidence that can inform decision-making (Aldrich, 2017). Some studies have found that social capital may help foster resilience in difficult times (Aldrich, 2017). Through the use of technology, new kinds of social capital have been created and new forms of collaboration have been identified which enable quicker achievement of goals (Deepak et al., 2016). Social capital has been linked to economic performance and productivity (Dasgupta, 2001).

Among university students, social capital has been found to enable engagement in learning that leads to improved academic performance (Deepak et al., 2016); and has been linked to creativity (Gu et al., 2014). Three main types of social capital that may be considered of relevance to university students have been identified: bonding, bridging and linking (Aldrich, 2017).

Bonding capital refers to the close relationships among friends and families through which emotional support is provided and group cohesion is encouraged (Laser & Leibowitz, 2009). Bridging capital refers to social connections among individuals from

different backgrounds and ethnic groups and who adhere to different societal norms and beliefs. Such capital forms a bridge among numerous social networks (Claridge, 2018). Linking capital refers to the establishment of social connections between particular entities or individuals and figures of power and authority who have decision-making influence (Claridge, 2018; Hawkins & Maurer, 2012).

The authors of this study believe that all three of these types of social capital were deployed among university students under pandemic conditions at the NWU as they sought to make sense of the “new normal” and go about their lives as students.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns caused a major shock to the existing system of social capital, limiting the in-person interactions that had underpinned this system and producing a shift to virtual and restricted forms of social connection as a new dominant *modus operandi* (Zheng et al., 2020). In this context, universities and students were creative and innovative in rethinking the ways in which social capital could be fostered and how student social behaviour could adapt accordingly (Gu et al., 2014).

Student well-being

In addition, universities implemented a number of ideas to help buffer the severe impacts that COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown measures were having on the physical, emotional, and social well-being of the students (Kele & Mzileni, 2021).

The closure of academic institutions in South Africa from March 2020 impeded academic performance and success for many students. The restricted access to and cessation of numerous psycho-educational and social development activities at these institutions caused turmoil among students (Lederer et al., 2021). The students at the NWU were not spared from these negative impacts.

As much as young people like to use new technologies and online social media platforms, they mostly prefer their social connections and shared experiences to be in-person and spontaneous (Neuwirth et al., 2021). Many students attend university for the spontaneous, exciting happenings which are available on campus and which contribute to their own personal growth and development (Dodd et al., 2021).

From anecdotal evidence and based on our interactions with students at the NWU, students report that they feel a sense of belonging and that they are part of a community, as well as a sense of purpose, when they participate in events, particularly in-person ones. Once these kinds of events were put on hold or restricted, many students said that they did not know what to do with their time, talents, and creative energies. In addition, some student leaders reported a sense of loss as they were now unable to execute their portfolio-specific duties and activities effectively (Alaali, 2022).

The result was something of an existential crisis among the youth at universities (Lee & Jung, 2021). Student affairs and services staff at various higher education institutions in South Africa reported increasing requests for emotional support from students (Brodie et al., 2022; Naidoo & Cartwright, 2020). At the NWU, student wellbeing came under

threat in a number of ways (Kruger & Kok, 2020). Many students struggled with the idea of catching the virus, especially those who were living in communal spaces with other individuals. These students reported that although they complied with COVID-19 regulations and protocols, they were unable to control the behaviours and actions of others with whom they were living.

A Swiss study reported an increase in depressive and anxiety symptoms, with some students reporting feelings of loneliness and isolation (Volken et al., 2021). Another study found that many students felt vulnerable with insufficient resources available to help them cope and that, as a result, they reverted to unhealthy mechanisms for coping such as alcohol and substance abuse; high risk behaviour, such as drinking and driving; and anger and aggression (Charles et al., 2021). Some students at the NWU were similarly affected.

Nevertheless, and despite the severe challenges posed by COVID-19, most of the students at the NWU showed great creativity and resilience in their efforts to counter the negative effects of the pandemic on their well-being (Motswenyane, 2020).

Student social behaviour and psycho-social support

The APA Dictionary of Psychology (2022, para. 1) defines social behaviour as “any action performed by interdependent conspecifics (members of the same species); in humans, an action that is influenced, directly or indirectly, by the actual, imagined, expected, or implied presence of others; any one of a set of behaviours exhibited by gregarious, communal social species, including cooperation, affiliation, altruism.” Research indicates that students are social beings who continually challenge themselves to grow and develop, including in environments that may not be conducive to healthy practices. Research has reported that students’ learning experiences are influenced by the ways in which the social systems of which they are part function (Nandy et al., 2021). This includes the impacts of financial barriers within those systems, and how those systems may influence their mental health and, potentially, undermine their sense of social balance (Hagedorn et al., 2021). Such impacts can cause certain discrepancies in students’ development which, in turn, necessitate the provision of appropriate psycho-social support and guidance.

Psycho-social support is described by the APA Dictionary of Psychology (2022, para. 1) as “a broad term describing a range of services offered by mental health professionals to those in pressing need. Whether designed to help individuals cope with a serious illness or to alleviate distress in whole communities following a disaster, such services may range from mental health counselling, psycho-education, and group support to spiritual support and other assistance which is provided by psychologists, social workers, and pastoral counsellors, among others. Studies have found that student social behaviour and the availability of psycho-social support may have both positive impacts, for example, in relation to academic performance and negative impacts, such as in terms of fostering crime; substance abuse; and peer relationship problems, on students’ overall well-being (Armstrong, 2011).

Methodology

The current study describes some aspects of a social behavioural project and some of the psycho-social interventions adopted at the North-West University in response to the imposition of lockdown measures under COVID-19 from March 2020. The authors of this study, who played a leadership role in establishing and implementing these programmes, consider the contribution that they, and more generally, student affairs and services staff, made to the operational integrity of the university at the height of the pandemic; as well as the potential role of these programmes in fostering “social capital” among the students involved.

Prior to the establishment of these initiatives, data were gathered on the intermediaries responsible for communicating and engaging with students – for example, peer helpers; house committee members; radio station volunteers; students’ campus council members; and faculty – the modes of communication deployed by these intermediaries; and their effectiveness in reaching a broad swathe of the student community. The aim being to establish a system of communications that would be effective under COVID-19 and lockdown conditions. These data were used for this study.

This study considers the processes which led to the establishment of the social behavioural project and a series of virtual programmes in support of student social engagement, particularly during hard lockdown levels 4 and 5 in South Africa. These programmes focused on sport and wellness, including e-sports and virtual training and exercises; arts and culture, including virtual art exhibitions, virtual arts and musical performances (such as by a choir, “harmonists” and a symphony orchestra), virtual art collections and digital jigsaw puzzles; psycho-social support in the form of webinars, podcasts, weekly content dissemination, and mental health challenges; and entertainment provided primarily via the various campus radio stations. In this regard, this study draws on data on the various offerings which were implemented among the students by SAS staff and the students themselves.

Discussion

Interventions to enhance student well-being and social capital

Student social behaviour project

At the height of coronavirus infections across South Africa, a student social behaviour project was implemented by staff members of the Student Life Department and the Campus Protection Services Division at the North-West University to address concerns that had been raised by the university’s COVID-19 Response Team (C-19 RT) about a lack of student adherence to COVID-19 protocols and regulations.

A campaign was launched on all three of the university’s campuses deploying a cohort of student volunteers dubbed “COVID-19 compliance buddies”, with a view to educating and raising awareness among students, and monitoring and recording instances of non-compliance by students. Rather than using punitive measures to address instances of students flouting COVID-19 protocols and regulations, the

compliance buddies, working in collaboration with and under the supervision of student affairs and services staff, engaged with students to understand if and why they were not complying with appropriate rules and protocols. Based on these engagements and the observations of the compliance buddies, reports were submitted to the C-19 RT through the Office of the Executive Director: Student Life, with a view to establishing trends – both in terms of student behaviour and common areas of non-compliance – and making recommendations for ameliorative action. For example, based on the reports from compliance buddies, it was established that the university needed to reconsider its communication strategy and re-package its messaging. In essence, the idea was to focus on how the university could communicate important safety and practical considerations with regards to the threat posed by the pandemic, as well as the efforts that could be taken to prevent its spread. These reports to the C-19 RT also led to the development of other innovative intervention measures and strategies.

Psycho-social support interventions

Despite the restrictions imposed in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, student affairs and services staff at the university continued to implement various psycho-social interventions on a number of levels. Table 1 below provides an overview of the various interventions implemented.

Table 1: Psycho-social interventions and social events

Intervention	Description
Psycho-educational webinars and content	The university hosted online psycho-educational webinars on a bi-weekly basis in order to address the mental health needs of the students. The content for these webinars was developed by registered psychologists, social workers, and counsellors from the university's student counselling and development divisions, who also presented these virtual meetings. Psycho-educational content was also distributed to the students via the university's online platforms and various social media platforms. Psycho-educational themes addressed by the content on offer included: depression; motivation; goal setting; healthy relationships; gender-based violence; and examination preparation.
Continuation of student residence-life activities in a safe, controlled environment	A need for residence activities was voiced by residence students and student residence leaders (house committee members). Accordingly, a number of proposed activities were presented at the C-19 RT and approved for implementation. Subsequently, a number of residence activities, such as residence meetings; religion-related engagements; and recreational and sport activities, resumed on a smaller scale in line with the institution's COVID-19 occupational health and safety (OHS) guidelines. House parents and house committee members acted as compliance officers to ensure adherence to protocols in the course of these activities.

Intervention	Description
	<p><i>Student wellness intervention measures project</i></p> <p>Born of a need to attend to the well-being of students who had chosen to remain at university residences and in an effort to keep them engaged, a student wellness intervention measures project (SWIMP) was developed and led by Student Life staff through the department's various divisions responsible for student counselling and development; sport; and arts and culture. The project emanated from discussions in the C-19 RT which raised concerns about the students' mental health and the possible devastating effects of the new lockdown measures on overall student wellness, particularly during the recess period when most students could not return to their homes.</p>
E-sport	<p>In response to COVID-19 restrictions prohibiting contact sport events, the university's sport division devised a number of new e-sports events such as local area network (LAN) leagues and online chess, as well as virtual training and exercise activities.</p>
Arts and culture events	<p>The university's arts and culture division hosted a number of in-person arts and culture events such as "COVAS" – a play on "Canvas" and COVID-19. (Before COVID-19, the university hosted an event known as "Canvas" at which students participated in a mural painting event using the wall in the student centre precinct as their canvas. With the advent of the pandemic, students' creative thinking led to the event's name being changed to "COVAS".) Other events included debates, and student serenading (Sêr), in line with COVID-19 protocols. COVAS was the first competitive student event hosted by the Students' Campus Council (SCC): Arts Council since the start of the pandemic in 2020. The goal of COVAS was to offer students a platform to voice their opinions in creative and constructive ways.</p>
Community involvement	<p>Students took part in a number of activities organised by the Student Rag Community Service (SRCS) such as Barefoot Day and virtual bus tours of local community projects.</p>
Leadership development	<p>Training and development officers in the student counselling and development division, with the approval of the C-19 RT, coordinated and conducted a number of online and controlled in-person leadership and support sessions for student leaders.</p>

The role of student affairs and services staff

At the onset of the national lockdown in March 2020, the university established a COVID-19 Response Team to ensure operational continuity in the context of the major restrictions imposed in response to the pandemic, including lockdowns at a range of levels. Initially, Student Life staff members were not included on this team, raising the spectre of the marginalisation of the student affairs and services staff in the university's operations at this critical juncture.

However, this omission was quickly rectified and SAS staff went on to make a significant contribution to operational continuity and the completion of the academic year at the university, and also played a pivotal role in helping to create a vibrant, safe and supportive environment for students in the midst of the pandemic.

For example, the Campus Health Care Centres (CHCCs), which fall under the remit of the Student Life Department at NWU, were responsible for the quarantine and isolation site that was established under COVID-19; for managing reported positive COVID-19 cases; and for conducting regular contact tracing. They also promoted awareness of the pandemic and related health concerns, holding webinars on these topics, while continuing to attend to their primary healthcare responsibilities. In addition, Student Life staff, comprising a multi-disciplinary team of psychologists, social workers, counsellors, nursing practitioners, contracted doctors, general staff, sport scientists and managers, and radio station staff and managers provided psycho-social and other forms of support in an effort to promote the holistic well-being of students, thus enabling them to complete their academic work. Student Life staff also sought to engage students in co-curricular activities, including in the areas of arts and culture, sport, community engagement, and student governance and leadership.

Standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various activities were developed to ensure that they took place in a safe environment and with a view to curbing the spread of the coronavirus.

The authors of this article led these endeavours in their capacities as executive director and campus director in the university's Student Life Department. A key goal for the leadership of the Student Life Department in advocating for the student social behaviour project and the psycho-social interventions was to promote forms of on-campus social engagement which would dissuade students from going off-campus where there was no guarantee of effective COVID-19 preventative measures being in place, and then returning to campus and potentially spreading newly acquired infection.

Skills development

The establishment and implementation of the student social behaviour project and the psycho-social interventions were undertaken in collaboration with the students themselves, who provided a number of recommendations for the kinds of well-being initiatives that should be promoted, and also shaped the nature and the form of the resulting activities through their participation. This collaboration fostered the establishment of meaningful engagements and connections within a supportive environment, resulting in an increase in social capital among the student population and in the overall university environment.

Students at the university deployed a number of creative, critical-thinking and innovation skills in collaboration with SAS staff in helping to establish and implement the various psycho-social interventions and co-curricular initiatives that were undertaken. They collaborated with a range of stakeholders on campus, including in the

occupational health and safety division; at the various facilities; at the campus health care centres; and in the student support services division.

The students helped to conceptualise, plan and implement new activities and interventions within the necessary occupational health and safety protocols and guidelines. Under a constantly shifting COVID-19 regulatory framework, the students, with the support of SAS staff, developed crisis-management skills and demonstrated their adaptability to new circumstances.

Their engagement in forging and implementing the new initiatives also entailed honing their networking and negotiating skills and developing an understanding of the workings of institutional processes and how these processes may fit into realizing the bigger mission and vision of the university, including, in this instance, in a time of a global crisis. Accordingly, the student involvement in the initiatives led by Student Life to promote their social engagement and psycho-social well-being on campus may be viewed as having made a significant contribution to their own social capital.

Lessons Learned

It was found that it is possible to produce effective forms of student engagement beyond those conventionally produced through face-to-face interaction, particularly if such engagement is driven by effective collaboration and partnership between students, staff and management, as well as external stakeholders, on campus. Moreover, the adoption of a hybrid face-to-face and online model could allow for the implementation of multi-faceted initiatives. In this regard, the use of streaming to broadcast events, which was something of an innovation, enabled large numbers of students at the NWU to “experience” events from a distance.

Further, the establishment of a multi-disciplinary team, comprising students, staff, management and external stakeholders, was important to ensuring effective planning and implementation of interventions and initiatives.

As part of such a team, it was found that student affairs and services staff have a crucial role to play in supporting university operations in times of crisis. In this context, there is a need for future research to extrapolate the lessons that may be learned from the experiences of SAS practitioners during hard times, such as those occasioned by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the damaging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher education sector in general and the work of student affairs and services staff in particular, a number of measures were implemented to ensure operational continuity at various institutions of higher learning, including the NWU, with some success. This article has described the leadership role played by student affairs and services staff at the NWU in collaboration with other university departments in support of student engagement and psycho-social well-being at a time of crisis, including in the context of how this

work supported the institution's operational integrity and fostered social capital among the students.

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