# The Emergence of the Lockdown University: Pitfalls, Challenges, Opportunities

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally disrupted our way of life and has resulted in international panic over the closure of borders, universities, businesses, organisations and the transport system, in an effort containing what is seen as the ever-increasing community spread of the virus. Universities in particular, have not been immune from this crisis, with most of them grappling to finish the academic year, ensure quality in the curricula itself, and move towards online methods of teaching and learning as a substitute for contact classes. In this chapter, I theorise what I term the 'lockdown university', a quarantined university that pretends that it is still operating as 'business-as-usual', and which still attempts to reinforce its traditional practices and institutional behaviour during the COVID-19 crisis. I argue that the traditional 'business as usual' approach cannot account for our current realities and challenges, and that we need to rethink: 1) the purposes of the (lockdown) university; and 2) the potential implications that the lockdown university may have for teaching and learning, going forward. I draw on the late Italian philosopher, Antonio Gramsci's notion of the organic crisis to not only theorise the current inherent and structural challenges facing the public university, but also to propose some philosophical and empirical solutions regarding reconceptualising the purposes of the lockdown university, enacting decolonial curricula, and strengthening teaching and learning in this new reality.

**Keywords**: lockdown university, higher education, COVID-19, curricula, teaching and learning, decolonisation

## Introduction

COVID-19 has fundamentally disrupted our way of life and has resulted in many countries battling to respond to the pandemic through shutting down the transport system, schools, universities, companies and the economy in general. Globally, it has resulted in millions of people getting infected, with thousands unfortunately succumbing to the disease (see World Health Organisation 2020). This has forced us to come up with an interdisciplinary approach in response to the growing community spread (see Bai *et al.* 2020; World Health Organization 2020; Xu *et al.* 2020). Universities, like all sectors of the economy, have also been fundamentally disrupted by this pandemic, with academics under great strain and pressure to finish the academic programme through various online learning platforms in an effort at completing the academic year. Prevalent in this operational logic is the implicit and often taken-for-granted assumption that it can still be 'business as usual' at the university, and that resorting to the virtual teaching and learning pedagogies is a potential substitute for contact classes, and, in some instances, a *better* pedagogical option. More troubling is another emergent assumption that students (and academic staff) will be able to cope and adjust to this new reality without due consideration as to whether they have access to a safe shelter, working computer/laptop, data, internet access, food, and other factors that greatly influence and shape learning.

In this chapter, I theoretically reflect on the emergence of what I term the 'lockdown university' as a result of the COVID-19. I reflect on the lifeworld in the time of COVID-19, foregrounding the purposes of the lockdown university, the need for (decolonial) curriculum imagination during this disruptive period, and implications for teaching and learning in the lockdown university. I rely on the late Italian philosopher Gramsci's notion of the organic crisis to think through the internal structural and crippling challenges facing the academy during this disruptive period, and the potential solutions to the crisis (Adamson 1983; Cox 1983; Simon 2015). I end the chapter with some philosophical and empirical recommendations on the need for a social justice understanding, particularly in the university triad, namely: academics, students, and the (lockdown) university. This is in order to make sense of the new reality and interrogate the required solutions. I now turn to exploring the disruptions in the university.

## The Public University: Purposes, Contestations, Challenges

Dutch philosopher Biesta (2009) argues that there are three dialectical purposes of education in society. Firstly, we have the qualifications aspects, which deals mainly with the provision and transmission of education to the young; in this context, the students in the university. This is where we see the inculcation of skills, competencies, and attributes to the young in an effort to enable them to negotiate social reality and obtain employment. The second purpose of education is 'socialisation', where education also concerns the hidden and implicit induction of students into the norms, values, and beliefs of a particular society. This alignment of education with the social, economic and political orders reflects Bourdieu's (2011) notion of cultural capital, where students gain access to the official and recognised habitus that they will need to negotiate beyond the family and religious community (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam; 2019a; 2019b). The third purpose of education for Biesta (2009) is what she refers to as 'subjectification', which largely concerns students becoming independent in their thinking, being, and acting. While 'socialization' is about being 'groomed', 'raised', 'inducted' and 'taught' how to behave and adapt to society, 'subjectification' is inherently about critical reflection on, and challenging the things that we take for granted in society, troubling our assumptions and conceptions of what is 'normal' and 'acceptable'. In this lockdown university context, how do we design curricula in such a way that it stimulates students and fosters criticality and critical engagements while trying to navigate and balance the disruptive nature of COVID-19 in our planning?

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged while many universities in the global South[1] are currently trapped in protracted struggles to 'reform', 'transform' and 'decolonis' the public university (Badat 2017b; Dey 2019; Hlatshwayo & Shawa 2020). The emergent student protests have often shone a spotlight on the alienating and colonising nature of curricula in the Global South, and the need to de-commodify the public university away from the

[1] The global South refers to the epistemic alliances and relations shared by those who have the common experience of colonisation and apartheid (Gordon, 1983, 2005, 2011). It should be noted that these alliances are not necessarily physical, and are largely epistemic and intellectual, in an effort to re-centre Othered knowledge systems (see Comaroff & Comaroff 2012).

neoliberal logic that sees students as fee paying 'clients' accessing the 'curriculum goods' of the university (Klein & Jenkins 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017; Ruddock 2018). Calls for transformation in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, India, Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom, Latin America and others, have sought to challenge the continuing epistemic inequality between Eurocentric thought and indigenous knowledge systems, and the emerging neoliberal regimes of academic productivity, performance management, and the presupposed efficiency (see De Sousa Santos *et al.* 2016; Sanchez 2018; Thaman 2003). In the South African context, the 2015-2016 student movements highlighted the Eurocentric and colonial nature of the South African higher education landscape, with the need to re-centre African epistemic traditions in curricula and de-centre and provincialise Euro-American thought (Maxwele 2016; Ngcobozi 2015; Ramaru 2017). Thus, even before the COVID-19 period, Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020) and others had already called for the need to reflect on the purposes of higher education in light of the academic disruption and ethical call for transformation currently occurring in the global South (Badat 1994; Council on Higher Education 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many universities closing their campuses, sending students back home, and resorting to online teaching and learning methods in an attempt to cope with the new normal. Driven by the national and international calls to self-isolate, the stay at home orders, and public lockdowns to reduce the community spread of the disease, universities were forced[2] to close down their campuses to at least guarantee the public safety of students and staff. Life in the lockdown university has resulted in academics being under pressure to move their teaching and learning material online aimed at ensuring that curriculum offerings continue at various universities. Online teaching is largely seen in emergent discourses on 'remote teaching', the 'rush to the finish line', 'staff wellbeing' and 'cognitive dissonance' in describing teaching during the COVID-19 period. For Maringe (2020), there is a vast amount of scholarship on distance education and teaching and learning that contact universities still need to be acquainted with before they 'jump' into online pedagogies:

[2] I am using the word 'forced' loosely, as many universities largely agreed with the World Health Organization and their national government's guidelines on reducing the spread of the COVID 19.

> First is the fact that both staff and students do not quite know how to conduct university business in the distance mode. There is a vast and complex scholarship of distance learning, which traditional universities are not quite up to speed with (Guardia 2016). Mere posting of teaching and learning materials on platforms such as SAKAI without the underpinning Pedagogies is likely to negatively affect both quality and effectiveness of students learning. Secondly, the transition to online learning is often thought of as a cheaper option. There is a significant amount of human resource and technological support needed to sustain a meaningful online learning (Bates 2016). The initial costs of setting up effective online education are quite substantial and many universities will not have budgeted for this in the current academic year. The tendency will be to turn to cheaper online options which may negatively influence both quality and effectiveness (Maringe 2020).

In this chapter, I trouble the emergent challenges facing the lockdown universities in the ongoing efforts with the 'business as usual' approach through online teaching. I suggest possible epistemic solutions that might help alleviate some of the challenges to help the academy, academics, and students. I now turn to the theoretical framing of the study, namely, Gramsci's notion of the organic crisis.

## Theoretical Insights: Gramsci and the Organic Crisis

Writing about the challenges that were confronting Benito Mussolini's fascist government in Italy, Gramsci (1975) suggested what he terms the 'totality bloc', that is, the crisis that is faced by the ruling class in being unable to claim their legitimacy and control in society (Adamson 1983; Cox 1983). He argued that an organic crisis emerges when the ruling party ceases to have monopoly over the major political decisions in society, and people begin to subvert, think or respond counter-hegemonically (see Gramsci 1975). The organic crisis occurs when people themselves cease to believe in and accept the word of the national government and begin to move to abandon their political party affiliations. For Gramsci, this is a historical, political, ideological and internal structural crisis that emerges in a country when people, not only cease to believe in the *official* structures of government, but also begin to socially

construct alternatives sources of belonging, acceptance and recognition for themselves outside of the formal and legal authority and its political structures. This crisis of legitimacy occurs when the State no longer enjoys the public confidence of the people. This has been seen globally with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran, the Mugabe dispensation in Zimbabwe, the Maduro administration in Venezuela, the Geun-hye dispensation in South Korea, and increasingly the Donald Trump administration in the United States. There is emerging mistrust between what is seen as the 'deep state' and the citizens it governs, which is designed to build suspicion, distrust, and antagonism against democratic state institutions. This results in people generally believing they are better off without the intervention of the State or its governing institutions (see Parmar 2017).

Gramsci scholars such as Rancière (1995), and Laclau and Mouffe (see Mouffe 1993; Laclau & Mouffe 2000) argue that central to Gramsci's philosophical contributions is the idea that democracy should be underpinned by conflict and the potential emergence of what Rancière (1995) refers to as the 'political'. That is, the way of being together that enables and legitimates irrevocable difference, without physical conflict. Put differently, democracy is that which creates the conditions of possibility for the emergence of (political) difference without forcing assimilation, co-option or agreement.

More recently, Badat (2017b) and Hlatshwayo (2019) have advanced Gramsci's work on the organic crisis as a theoretical lens by means of which to examine the challenges facing South African universities. In this chapter, I contribute to this emerging body of work that looks at the South African academy as not only structurally differentiated and fragmented, but also as an existential organic crisis in responding to the 2015-2016 ethical demands for transformation and decolonisation. I argue, the emergent COVID-19 has added to these challenges. I now turn to this discussion more closely.

## The Lockdown University: Its Potential (Inclusive) Purpose

The COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to critically reflect on the purposes of the contemporary public university, and the higher education landscape to fashion in the Global South. The purpose of higher education remains deeply contested and challenged, with some scholars advancing the *idea* of the public university as an institution underpinned by the values of epistemic diversity (or plurality), critical engagement, and democratic

tolerance (see Badat 2017a; Heleta 2016; Hlatshwayo & Shawa 2020). One should note that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the public university in South Africa had already been facing the epistemic, cultural, and economic crisis that it still has not resolved. The crisis was critically highlighted by the student movements and progressive Black[3] academics post 2015 (Naicker 2015; 2016; Ngcobozi 2015).

The public university continues to marginalise, colonise, oppress, and depress particularly those who occupy Black ontological subjectivities (Hlatshwayo 2019; Khunou 2019; Mbembe 2016). I argue that the purpose of the public university during this pandemic is to respond to three fundamental crises, namely the epistemic crisis, the cultural crisis, and the economic crisis. The epistemic crisis refers to the continuing crisis of epistemic injustice that occurs when knowledge and intellectual traditions from the Global South continue to be pushed to the periphery of the academy, with Euro-American thought remaining dominant and central to its curriculum design (Arday & Mirza 2018; Fay 2018; Grech 2015). We need to incorporate the rich and diverse indigenous knowledge systems, Subaltern Studies, African American Studies, Africana Philosophy, the Caribbean philosophical traditions and other intellectual formations and traditions from the global South, in an attempt to re-centre, in our curriculum imaginations, these othered knowledge systems. By calling for the re-centring of 'Othered' epistemic traditions in curriculum design during this COVID-19 crisis, I am not calling for the epistemic erasure of simply rejecting all European and American knowledge. Rather, I am calling for the re-centring of African and Global South epistemic traditions, so that they can reclaim their place in curricula and can be valued, recognised, and legitimated in the broader ecosystem of knowledge. Heleta (2016), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Mbembe (2016) argue that the current curricula in the public university still reflects the colonial and apartheid roots of white supremacy and Black ontological oppression, and as such, the curricula neither help nor develop students. One of the major challenges experienced with the current drive to move teaching and learning material online is that curricula is

[3] Although I acknowledge the emergent literature that suggest that race does not exist biologically, I have purposively chosen to capitalized to highlight the sociological, real and material effects of race and racism in society, particularly as phenomenologically experienced by those who occupy Black ontological identities (see Bamshad & Olson 2003; Gravlee 2009; Kennedy 1995).

often assumed in such conversations. In other words, curricular reform is silenced. The conversation largely focuses on the transmission of knowledge and according students' pedagogic access, and not necessarily on the kinds of knowledges and epistemic traditions that are recognised, valued and legitimated in our curricula. Simply put, is there space for critical conversations and engagements on curriculum reform and the importance of decolonising knowledge during the pandemic, or is this secondary to the current struggles of ensuring that the teaching and learning agenda continues as usual without compromising the health and wellbeing of staff and students? I argue that this disruption offers us the opportunity to continue to reflect, engage, theorise and be self-reflexive on the importance of prioritising global South and African epistemic traditions in our curricula.

Related to the epistemic crisis, the cultural crisis refers to the social-political and social dislocation that Black students and Black academics continue to feel as they are isolated, marginalised, mentally abused and socially dislocated from the institutional culture. This is particularly true for those who are in historically white universities (see Kamanzi 2019; Khunou, Phaswana, Khoza-Shangase & Canham 2019; Kumalo 2018). Black students often feel that the institutional culture(s) and spatiality of the historically white university serves as an existential reminder of their structural discrimination and the social and academic challenges they constantly experience due to their non-being and non-belonging in the academy (Tabensky & Matthews 2015). Kumalo (2018) reminds us that, in historically white universities, there are struggles of legitimacy, recognition and belonging, with Black students ontologically imposing themselves on the academy in an effort to negotiate their access. For Kumalo (2018), this constructs the 'natives of nowhere' in the university, who culturally represent and signify this whiteness in the academy and in society. Universities in general, and historically white universities in particular, are involved in this social reproduction of these natives of nowhere, through various academic development programmes such as the 'grow your timber' and the national New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) initiatives designed to recruit, train, target, mentor, and develop early career Black academics, who are then employed because they fit 'neatly' and 'cleanly' into the dominant institutional culture of a department and university. For Hlengwa (2019) and Booi, Vincent, and Liccardo (2017), these academics constitutes the 'safe bets', who are employed to fit in with the broader employment equity demands of the institution, without interrupting, disrupting

or challenging the hegemonic institutional culture. Khoza-Shangase (2019) reflects on her painful experiences of navigating a depressing institutional culture and the emergent intellectual and emotional toxicity as a result:

> I have diagnosed myself as suffering from intellectual and emotional toxicity induced by racism, harassment, discrimination, and white privilege within the academy. Toxicity is defined as the degree to which a substance can damage an organism or the degree to which it can be poisonous (Campbell 2007). In audiology, my field of practice and research, there is a phenomenon referred to as ototoxicity. Ototoxicity is the property of being topic to the ear. This form of toxicity is commonly medication-induced, can be predictable but not always preventable, but can be identified, monitored and managed to varying degrees of success. Imagine I, as a black female academic with its culture, systems and policies – this substance. My journey through higher education, through a black female student to associate professor in a historically white university, resonates and mirrors this phenomenon of toxicity exceptionally well (Khoza-Shangase 2019: 42).

The existential and emotional crisis presented here by Khoza-Shangase (2019) is not a new phenomenon in historically white universities. Scholars such as Sennett, Finchilescu, Gibson and Strauss (2003), Hlatshwayo (2015), and Tabensky and Matthews (2015), have highlighted various challenges that Black students and progressive Black academics often have to navigate in historically white universities. These include the 'adjustment' challenges, alternative forms of social capital to those that they have formed, as well as Black students and staff continuing to not feel at home in the academy. Thus, I argue that this disruptive period in the public university offers an epistemic and cultural opportunity to reflect on the continuing challenges, and structures of oppression that manifest themselves in historically white universities, and the need to socially produce a humanist university as we make sense of the new normal. Reflecting on how academics can cope with the anxiety, depression, and the pressures of teaching and learning during a pandemic, Knowles (2020) suggests that academics need to:

1) Take one moment at a time. You can't do everything, so pick one

> thing and do it. Try to live in the present, focusing energy on this half hour, this task, this conversation. You are not the messiah, so calm down and live this one moment as well as you can. 2) Limit social media. Yes, we want to keep up with what is happening, and keep in touch with family and friends. But for the anxious, social media becomes a black hole that feeds our anxieties. Pick the times you will check social media; turn the TV and radio off until their designated times. 3) Do one creative thing every day. Creativity (painting a stone; knitting a square; drawing a picture, or a diagram [sic] of what you are working on; working on a puzzle…). 4) Reach out. Speak to at least one person everyday outside of your home – connecting with others is vital when anxiety and depression make us want curl up in foetal position. Send that voice note or message or make that call to ask someone how they are doing. 5) Be kind – to yourself, and to others. We are living in very troubling times, so be gentle even when you want to scream. Recognise that we all feel helpless and scared, so keep on imagining a better world. This will keep us sane during crazy times (Knowles 2020).

The epistemic and cultural crises in South African higher education do not sufficiently account for the crises facing the South African academy even before the COVID-19 pandemic. There is the need to make sense of the economic crisis that underpins these challenges, and to question how to respond to them during and after this lockdown in the academy. We should recognise that South African higher education is profoundly and structurally shaped by the racialised logic of apartheid (Badat 1994; 2017a; 2017b). This has resulted in a fragmented and disparate higher education system, separated across the system between the historically white universities, historically Black universities, universities of technology, and the technical and vocational education and training colleges (hereafter TVET colleges).

The state funding of higher education has increased from about R20.9 billion in 2012 to about R26.2 billion in 2016 (Universities South Africa 2020). There has been an increase of about R5,3 billion in the Treasury's contribution to the higher education sector between 2012-2016, in an effort to fund the universities and ensure they are financially solvent. This is especially the case in light of the Fallist movement that sought to make higher education free for every student whose family or guardian earns less than R350 000 per year

(Universities South Africa, 2020). Another important funding mechanism for students to access university education has been the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which currently funds 604 114 students (National Student Financial Aid Scheme, 2020). Despite all these funding mechanisms, we still see hunger and accommodation challenges with students sleeping in university lecture halls and computer labs as they attempt to attend classes. Wegerif and Adeniyi (2019) report on the painful challenges of food insecurity in South African universities, with 64.5% of students at the University of the Free State and 55% at the University of KwaZulu-Natal indicating that they were struggling to access food. Thus, in our push for online learning, we need to be critical about who our students are, the structural challenges that they are facing, and to what extent the online teaching and learning could still continue in our present context. I turn now to this idea more closely.

## Teaching, Learning and the Pandemic

With all the current challenges facing the public university during this lockdown period, teaching and learning is arguably central. Universities have begun to conceptualise teaching and learning as the 'dumping' of curriculum material online in an attempt to salvage what is increasingly becoming a lost academic year. The operating logic of this discourse of salvaging the academic year, is largely driven by the need to ensure that it is 'business as usual' at the university, and that the university calendar, its ceremonial traditions and norms cannot be disturbed, and should continue as normal, albeit online. This insistence on the reestablishment of 'normalcy' and its social order presents a couple of challenges. Firstly, it reduces the pedagogical shift to entail the mere *uploading* of material online. Secondly, it forfeits the social justice and critical engagement agenda that is often required when teaching and learning is concerned. Academics are now under pressure to upload as much material as they can online to claim that they had made curricula 'accessible', without firstly asking accessible to who? Whose agenda is being served by online teaching and learning? This online teaching and learning regime align with the state sanctioned, World Economic Forum developed, discourse of President Cyril Ramaphosa[4] regarding South Africa needing to embrace the 'fourth

[4] Cyril Matamela Ramaphosa is the current state President of South Africa. He has been active in promoting this vision of South Africa as having the potential

industrial revolution' and its online pedagogies. This includes acknowledging the plight of the Black working class students located in the township and rural areas who would struggle with access to data, requisite electronic devices, shelter, food, a conducive environment, and training to handle the pressures and demands of online teaching and learning (Heffernan, Nieftagodien, Ndlovu & Peterson 2016; Hlalele 2012; Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam 2019a). Failure to respond to the above, will result in the reinforcement of inequality of the educational experience between middle to upper class students (who will be able to successfully participate in online pedagogies), and those who are still structurally trapped in the township and rural areas (who will continue to struggle to navigate online teaching and learning). In Hlatshwayo's (2015) study on first-generation Black working class students' experiences in a historically white university, one of the participants, Ntuthuko, commented that:

> The culture of the university systematically excludes those that are different to it. For your humanity to be respected you have to assimilate to the institutional culture of the university. A Black student from a township or rural parts of South Africa particularly from the Eastern Cape is constantly told that you are backward because you have a bad fashion taste, you are computer illiterate and you cannot speak English properly, in a nutshell you are not good enough [...] The student than embraces the inferiority complex, 'I am not good enough for [Rhodes University]'… (cited in Hlatshwayo 2015: 77).

Thus, if we are not careful, our pace and speed to get everything online could potentially lead to the unintended consequences of reinforcing technological and virtual inequality, marginality, and exclusion in society. This can result in millions of Black working class students being socially construed as the *natives of nowhere*, locked out of the online curricula and forced to stay longer in the academy as a result of failing to meet the demands of assessment and risking academic exclusion. We need to rethink teaching and learning during the time

to have 'smart cities', '5G' and massive technological advancement and innovation in an effort at creating a utopia of a liberal hyper-capitalist western society in South Africa (see for example Harvey 2019; Shoki 2019; Sutherland 2020).

of a pandemic. We need to ensure that all financially deserving students have access to technological devices, Wi-Fi, a conducive environment, food security, and shelter.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The novel COVID-19 pandemic continues to rupture our lives and has resulted in millions of people getting infected and thousands losing their lives (WHO, 2020). In an attempt to contain both the potential community spread of the virus and the resultant deaths, many countries have instituted a broad lockdown initiative. Public universities in the Global South in general, and in South Africa in particular, have also been placed under lockdown, with academics and students under intense pressure to cope with emergent demands. In this chapter, I have interrogated what I refer to as the lockdown university, an institution under quarantine as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. I argue that the pressures to move teaching and learning online have often ignored the curriculum design, the purposes of the university, as well as the importance of inclusive teaching and learning strategies in the university. I suggest that is important for us to consider three crises facing higher education at the moment, that is: the epistemic, cultural and economic crises, before any successful teaching and learning takes place. Furthermore, I argue that it is important that Black working class students have access to technological devices, WIFI, food, shelter and a conducive environment so that the new online pedagogies are rooted in social justice and equality. Failure to resolve the outlined crises and the structural issues as a prerequisite for any (virtual) teaching and learning will result in the creation of natives of nowhere, who will struggle academically, socially, and psychologically. Thus, based on the above conclusions, I make the following recommendations. Some historically white universities such as the University of the Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch University and the University of Cape Town have already started to help Black working class students with laptop devices and data (Staff Reporter 2020). While this is of great value, there are already emergent tensions within the South African higher education sector with those in historically Black universities and TVET colleges feeling marginalised and forgotten as their universities do not have similar resources and reserves to assist. It ought to be considered how the government, civil society, the business community, and others could possibly step in to assist these institutions.

Scholars such as Jansen (2020) and Mnguni (2020) have critiqued the drive to online teaching and learning and have argued that the pedagogy will not be underpinned by the ethics and values of inclusive education and social justice. They have suggested that the government should be open to extending the academic semester and push the academic year beyond 2020 to cater for the disruptions and eventual reduction in the COVID-19 related infection and death rates. Further research and policy is required to explore what this extension could look like in practice regarding matriculating students, government funding, university fees, curricula, teaching and learning, degree accreditations, professional bodies, and general university operations.

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