

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Responding to Covid-19: Experiences of Ashesi University's Student Affairs Team

Millicent Adjei,ⁱ Nina N.A. Pelsⁱⁱ & Vanessa N.D. Amoakoⁱⁱⁱ

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the abilities or lack thereof of many higher education institutions to adequately support the academic and co-curricular needs of students in times of crisis. In this reflective practitioner account, Schlossberg's Transition Theory is used to analyse the transitional experiences of students amid the Covid-19 pandemic and how the Office of Student and Community Affairs (OSCA) team at Ashesi University successfully supported students as they navigated the academic semester. One-to-one interviews with department heads of the five OSCA units were conducted alongside focus group discussions with a cross-section of 17 students. The findings suggest that (i) advising, (ii) engagement, and (iii) timely online support interventions contributed immensely to students' success in transitioning from in-person to remote learning.

Keywords

Ashesi University; Covid-19; crisis management; remote learning; Student Affairs; student transitions

Introduction

Students' educational success is a shared responsibility of various stakeholders including staff, faculty, parents, and institutional administrators. "Student affairs staff members are responsible for establishing the campus conditions that affirm students and providing the programmes and services to meet their academic and social needs outside the classroom" (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2011, p. 164). In Africa, the significance of Student Affairs continues to grow as more studies reveal how the practice is making important contributions to higher education on the continent (Moja, Schreiber & Luescher-Mamashela, 2014).

Student affairs practice is especially vital in times of crisis in ensuring that students' basic needs including housing and dining, good health and well-being, their social worth, self-esteem, and mental health are adequately supported. Crisis is a significant sudden or unexpected event, which disrupts the normal operations and values of an institution for any

i Dr Millicent Adjei is Director of Diversity & International Programmes, Ashesi University, Ghana.

ORCID: 0000-0002-5061-7709. Email: madjei@ashesi.edu.gh

ii Ms Nina Nana Aba Pels is Assistant Director, Student Life & Engagement, Ashesi University, Ghana.

ORCID: 0000-0003-4681-9073. Email: npels@ashesi.edu.gh

iii Ms Vanessa Nana Darkoa Amoako is a Diversity & Inclusion Coordinator, Ashesi University, Ghana.

ORCID: 0000-0003-1834-6758. Email: vanessa.amoako@ashesi.edu.gh

length of time and can threaten the well-being of personnel, property, financial resources, and/or institutional reputation (Zdziarski, 2006; Brennan & Stern, 2017; Shaw, 2017). In the past, crisis events in global higher education institutions (HEIs) have primarily centred on issues concerning harassment, bullying and discrimination suits, administrative scandals, student unrest, strikes, mass shootings, suicides, severe weather events, and terrorist attacks (Wang & Hutchins, 2010; Studenberg, 2017). Crisis management plans in this regard have focused mostly on human and environmental safety as part of the HEI goals (Rayburn, Anderson & Sierra, 2020). By caring for and ensuring a safe environment for all members of the campus community during a crisis, students can readily transition to safer conditions that enable the continuity of their academic experience.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the need for institutions to have adequate short- and long-term crisis management plans to ensure that the educational process is uninterrupted and to maintain learning continuity (Rayburn et al., 2020). A recent World Bank Education (2020) report on tertiary institutions' responses to the Covid-19 crisis reveals widespread institutional disruptions including those related to mass student displacements, weakened vital campus services and support, increased inequity, and inequality in accessing education. The report also mentions the inability of HEIs in retaining at-risk student populations and significant socio-emotional impacts on student well-being. Such disruptions rattle students' experience, threatening their overall safety and well-being and eventual educational outcomes. Thus, some students are experiencing significant strain and remain uncertain about the future of their education. This article, therefore, calls on HEIs to be systematic, analytical, and intentional in understanding students' transition experiences during crises. It challenges them to choose innovative interventions to meet students' needs amid crises and uncertainties.

To ensure the continuity of the various HEI functions, programmes, and processes, while responding to Covid-19 protocols, many institutions have been compelled to shift the delivery of their core mandates of teaching, learning and engagement to innovative remote platforms to maintain learning continuity. Since its inception, Ashesi University has operated as a full-time in-person institution with no online course offerings and teaching. The Covid-19 pandemic and the government of Ghana's directive for all HEIs to cease in-person instructions until January 2021 propelled Ashesi to move all its institutional functions online in March 2020. Thus, the objectives of this article are to: (i) highlight the various innovative approaches Student Affairs Professionals (SAPs) at Ashesi University adopted to support students to navigate the Covid-19 pandemic successfully; (ii) emphasise the impact of the responses on students' experiences; (iii) demonstrate the critical role theoretical frameworks can potentially play in the practice of SAPs to make more informed and efficient decisions.

Institutional Context

Ashesi University is a four-year private, liberal arts university located in the Eastern Region of Ghana. It seeks "to train a new generation of ethical and entrepreneurial leaders for Africa" (Ashesi University, 2002). Ashesi allows students to study across a broad field

including the humanities, arts and sciences and elect to pursue one of six majors: business administration, computer science, management information systems and three engineering programmes. The university started with a pioneer class of 30 students in 2002 and has grown steadily over the years with a current student population of 1173 from over 20 African countries.

Ashesi University's Student Affairs Structure

For most HEIs, growth in numbers comes with the expansion of services to students including job placements, career development, housing, health, counselling, and co-curricular activities (Appleton et al., 1978 p.372). For Ashesi University, the SA department that handles these functions is referred to as the Office of Students & Community Affairs (OSCA). It is made up of five independent units namely Career Services, Office of Diversity & International Programmes (ODIP), Coaching, Counselling & Academic Advising (CCA), Student Life & Engagement (SLE), and the Health Unit. OSCA is headed by the Dean of Students and Community Affairs, who is also a member of the Ashesi Executive Committee (see Figure 1).

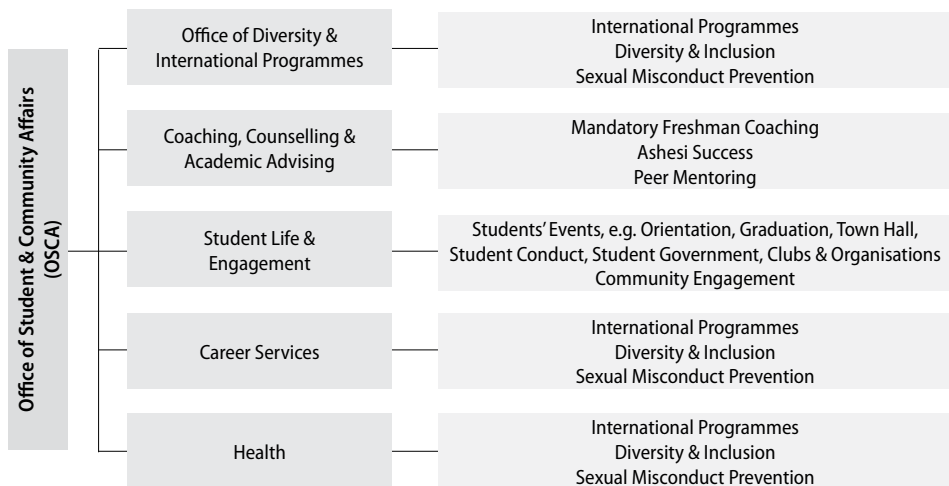


Figure 1: Organisational structure of Ashesi University's Student Affairs office

Conceptual Framework

HEIs globally are experiencing many uncertainties and changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While HEIs contend with providing equitable access and support for students to succeed, students are navigating various transitions in their academic and co-curricular commitments. To fully understand their experiences and the factors that influence the choices during this period, this reflective article is situated in Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The theory focuses on the various stages of transition and how individuals respond to the changes they are experiencing. This conceptual framework is necessary because the

understanding then informs the most suitable and appropriate intervention to support students in a practical and informed way. According to Schlossberg and Goodman (2005), transition involves any life event that requires the individual experiencing the event to feel a change from their normal. They further posit that to understand the resources needed to help the individual cope with and take charge of the transition, certain conditions, also known as the **4Ss** that influence the transition process must be understood. The **4Ss** include the **situation** causing the transition, the individual **self**, the **support** structures in place and the **strategies** adopted to respond to the transition.

- **Situation** refers to how the individual appraises what is being experienced to ascertain their understanding of the situation as good or bad, the control they have over what is happening, and the various triggers that initiate the event (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; Evans et al., 2010; Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). Covid-19 has brought about several unprecedented changes to the lifestyles and daily routines of students, forcing them to navigate many uncertainties. A deeper understanding of students' sense of agency as they navigate their changing situations is, therefore, critical to determine appropriate and relevant support to foster successful outcomes.
- **Self** refers to the personal, demographic characteristics and psychological resources of the individual experiencing the change, which affects their ability to cope; thus, recognising the uniqueness of each person experiencing the transition. Schlossberg and Goodman (2005) explain that factors such as socio-economic condition, gender, age, health status, ethnicity, outlook, ego, commitment, and values affect the way individuals experience any given event and determine their responses. They explain that these attributes can either provide the assets and resources needed for the transition or pose a threat or deficit, which can impact the change negatively. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted several factors such as socio-economic inequities that have challenged the equitable distribution and access to resources including internet connectivity, stable home settings and income (Casey, 2020). It is crucial to understand how these factors have affected students' educational outcomes to inform the needed interventions.
- **Support** focuses on the social resources that give multiple options for the individual to experience the transition smoothly. It may come from family, social connections, various institutional agents and structures, friendships, and peers (Schlossberg & Goodman, 2005). The impact of critical student support on their outcomes is buttressed by several research projects which suggest that when HEIs develop many conditions and structures to support diverse students they are more likely to be engaged, involved and to ultimately succeed (Adjei, 2019; Earwaker, 1992; Kuh et al., 2011; Quaye & Harper, 2015).
- Finally, **strategies** elaborate on the coping mechanisms put in place by the individual experiencing the transition to make the best out of the options available to them. Strategies, thus, focus on the individuals' coping behaviours to confront the change during the transition process (Evans et al., 2010; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Four

different coping strategies can characterise how individuals respond to the transition: their information-seeking abilities, the direct action they take, different inhibitions of their action, and their intrapsychic behaviour (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg & Goodman, 2005). SAPs are in a unique position to coach, advise and mentor students to combine and select the most effective strategies to cope with the pandemic's effect on their lives.

The 4Ss framework in Schlossberg's Transition Theory (2005), therefore, gives us an excellent framework to situate this reflective practitioner account. It centres the student experience and offers a nuanced understanding of their transitional experiences, and consequently helps HEIs to situate their interventions.

Methodology

Following the Ghanaian government's directive for all educational institutions to close their campuses to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus, Ashesi University transitioned its functions to various remote platforms. To better understand how SAPs and students experienced this sudden change, this research was undertaken to inform student affairs (SA) practice further and to offer insights into the lived experiences of the participants. More specifically, the article seeks to answer the following questions:

- (i) How did each SA unit respond to providing students with their core functions during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- (ii) How did students perceive the responses of the various SA units?

Data sources

Data was collected using a qualitative approach employing one-to-one interviews with department heads of the five OSCA units and focus group discussions (FGD) with a cross-section of students. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is used in "exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human phenomenon" (p. 4). Interviews were conducted with each unit lead to respond to the first question. This approach made it possible to ask follow-up questions to facilitate a deeper understanding of their interventions, as suggested by Merriam (2009).

The transition experiences of students caused by the Covid-19 pandemic could also best be understood by exploring the participants' lived experiences, which cannot be described solely from the perspectives of the SAPs. FGD methodology was used to gather information from the students on how the interventions adopted by the OSCA team impacted them. Kitzinger (1995) explains that FGD allows participants to interact with one another and process their experiences together by asking questions and seeking clarifications from the interviewer and other participants. This approach enhanced the understanding of the various ways students in this study were interpreting their experiences together and individually. To validate their experiences, students were asked: *How have you engaged with the various OSCA units since the pandemic and the move to remote learning, and how are these interventions impacting your academic experience?* The answers to these questions provided critical feedback on the effectiveness of the remote services offered by the SAPs.

Data sample and procedure

For each SA unit, the leads were sent an invitation via email to give an account of the interventions their respective department implemented to ensure business continuity. Besides the department heads, other OSCA team members who were directly involved in the various programmes were also engaged to seek clarification and, in some cases, correction of the initial narratives received for the article. A total of 9 SAPs volunteered their time for the research (see Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of Student Affairs staff

#	Gender	Department	Nationality
1.	Female	Coaching, Counselling and Academic Advising	American
2.	Male	Coaching, Counselling and Academic Advising	Ghanaian
3.	Female	Office of Diversity and International Programmes	Ghanaian
4.	Female	Office of Diversity and International Programmes	Ghanaian
5.	Female	Career Services	Ghanaian
6.	Male	Career Services	Ghanaian
7.	Female	Health Services	Ghanaian
8.	Female	Student Life and Engagement	Ghanaian
9.	Female	Student Life and Engagement	Ghanaian

After the first analysis of their responses, and to further validate them, three FGDs were organised with a cross-section of students. Research has revealed that it is important to include students' voices to ascertain the impact of institutional interventions (British Council, 2015). It also suggests that "when institutions listen to students and involve them in decision-making, they can be part of the answer in fostering empowered learners and responsive institutions" (British Council, 2015, p. 2). By including students' voices, HEIs are more responsive to students' aspirations for the future.

In recruiting students for the FGDs, a general email was sent to the entire student body, requesting them to sign up as participants. A total of 45 students enlisted and were divided into three groups of 15 to enable effective interaction and draw valuable information from their responses and insight. Ultimately, only two groups of 6 students were present for the first two sessions and 5 for the final session giving us a total of 17 for the FGD (see Table 2). Each session lasted two hours and was held via Zoom video conferencing.

Table 2: Profile of focus group participants

#	Gender	Year of graduation	Department	Nationality
1.	Male	2021	Business Administration	Congolese (DRC)
2.	Male	2023	Business Administration	Cameroonian
3.	Male	2023	Management Information Systems	Nigerian
4.	Female	2022	Computer Science	Nigerian
5.	Female	2022	Management Information Systems	Kenyan
6.	Female	2022	Management Information Systems	Ghanaian
7.	Male	2022	Computer Science	Ghanaian
8.	Female	2022	Mechanical Engineering	Ghanaian
9.	Female	2023	Computer Engineering	Ghanaian
10.	Male	2020	Computer Engineering	Ghanaian
11.	Male	2023	Management Information Systems	Ghanaian
12.	Female	2022	Electrical/Electronic Engineering	Ghanaian
13.	Female	2022	Management Information Systems	Ghanaian
14.	Female	2020	Business Administration	Ghanaian
15.	Male	2020	Business Administration	Ghanaian
16.	Male	2023	Mechanical Engineering	Ghanaian
17.	Female	2022	Electrical/Electronic Engineering	Ghanaian

Data collected from both groups of participants were recorded, transcribed, and coded under broad themes, namely *advising*, *engagement*, and *timely online transitioning support*. Morris (2015) supports the use of codes for interview data and asserts that “coding allows you to compare the responses of interviewees and convert the interviews into a meaningful, coherent analysis” (p. 128).

Enhancing trustworthiness

To ensure validity of the responses received from the OSCA unit leads, data was triangulated with that of the FGD to ascertain how the interventions enhanced students' out-of-classroom experience. Also, recognising that the authors work in different capacities in OSCA, bias was checked by being intentionally reflexive and deferring to other team members for their opinions throughout the writing of this article. The authors' positionality as insiders, however, offered significant access to the members interviewed and deeper expert knowledge and understanding of the concepts being discussed.

Despite the above measures, the limitations of this article are recognised due to the small sample size, especially for the students and the very focused and unique institutional context, which allowed the OSCA team to undertake their interventions successfully. The findings in this reflection may, therefore, not be generalisable in other HEI contexts.

Findings

Three main themes emanated from the coding of the responses from the FGDs conducted with the students. **Advising** focused on the various ways students sought guidance from the OSCA team to navigate and make decisions for themselves during the transition to remote teaching and learning. **Engagement** focused on how students, through their involvement with different institutional agents, were able to influence broader institutional decisions and policies, thus, ensuring suitable adjustments to many non-academic co-curricular interventions. **Timely online and remote transitioning support** focused on how students sought support from the OSCA team, with the help of technology. This ensured the provision of the appropriate resources and assistance to enable them to transition smoothly. The ensuing sections present details of the three main thematic findings.

Advising

According to Drake (2011), student advising is “about building relationships with students, locating places where they get disconnected and helping them get reconnected” (p. 8). As Crookston (1994) explains, though advising is concerned with “a specific personal or vocational decision”, it also involves “facilitating the student’s rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioural awareness and problem-solving, decision-making and evaluation skills” (p. 5). Throughout the FGDs, students mentioned needing more direction on managing multiple personal, home and academic challenges affecting their psychosocial and emotional abilities to focus and do meaningful academic work. This was corroborated by the Counselling, Coaching and Advising (CCA) unit, which reported an overwhelming increase in the caseload of students they had to see, resulting in them extending their advising sessions beyond regular working hours, including weekends.

Students also sought the health team’s support in addressing their healthcare concerns. The health team provided regular healthcare advice to students through scheduled online consultations to ensure that they were constantly equipped with the appropriate knowledge to make safe and healthy decisions during the pandemic. The department also partnered with the University’s health insurance provider to run a weekly programme that enabled members of the community to call and speak to health professionals to provide advice on their various health concerns. Interactions with students to identify their specific health needs enabled the health team to lead committee discussions on ensuring the safe return of domestic and international students to their homes following the campus closure.

Thus, students indicated that (1) timely response and action, and (2) accessibility and sustained interaction, were factors that worked well for them in seeking advising support from the OSCA team (see Table 3). On the other hand, students mentioned that (1) more proactive action from the OSCA team, and (2) more targeted communication for student year groups were factors missing from the team’s support (see Table 3).

Table 3: Student perspectives on advising

Positive factors	
Timely response and action	“I think what works for me is how fast the people used to reply. You don't have to wait for two days, one week, two weeks for someone to reply. Immediately someone replies and give you the steps to follow. And if you need a referral, they will do it.”
	“I am currently doing five virtual internships and it got overwhelming because most of them had some expectations. I got depressed along the way. I contacted [the counsellor] and she helped me to work things out.”
	“The second one which I can share with you is the support of the health centre. I remember in the beginning when we were told that we were going home, people started asking me if we will get masks and I remember calling the nurse and the Dean and asking them about this, and at that moment they released all the masks, sanitisers, and other protective materials, so that we can go home safely. That was really helpful.”
Accessibility and sustained interaction	“The counselling team was amazing. Though I didn't reach out to [the counsellor], she reached out to me and constantly followed up at every stage (whether it was time for the final exams or final submissions). She was always there to send videos to help me scale through those difficult times, and that was so helpful!”
	“It was helpful to be able just to ask [the college nurse] any question at any point in time, not only when I was sick.”
	“The counsellor came up strong. You can book appointments with her. She kept listening and helping you through things, and I felt that was really good. Once in a while, I think for those of us who check with her she sends Whatsapp messages to check progress. So, I think it was kind of touching.”
Negative factors	
More proactive action	“Some people were finding it difficult to come to class, especially those in different time zones. People were having home problems combining it with school. And most of these people would not go to the counselling department for their own good. Some people want to keep it to themselves. If there is something that can be done to reach out to people more than they reach out to the department, I believe that will help them.”
	“I don't think students don't know who to go to. Going forward, we can try to identify some of these students and the reasons why they are not seeking help.”
	“Sometimes we get fake news on Covid-related issues. I think the health team could give us more information and precautions that we could follow.”

Negative factors (continued)	
More targeted communication for student year groups	“There was this whole email on how the university was going to run. But I think we need to kind of segregate the year groups and do a ‘new normal’ kind of reorientation because people don’t know where to go for what at this moment.”
	“I think if you are going to make it more interactive for the students, I think OSCA should start early. At the beginning of each semester every department should post how they can be reached and what they can offer the students. Maybe during the semester, every month, you have a compulsory meet-up with the year group to check up and get feedback from everyone. If you send forms, I don’t think everyone will fill them [in] to really capture what people are saying and what they are feeling. Sometimes questions and responses in forms can be very limiting.”
	“I am not sure but I feel like people don’t read their emails, so they might miss emails that come from the various units concerning certain things. That’s one challenge.” [Said in reference to the OSCA team exploring new ways to reach students.]
	“The other thing also being that maybe for things like town hall meetings, we should rethink how we meet in terms of numbers. Maybe we can meet in smaller groups because you realise that sometimes people have genuine concerns but their voices get missing within the crowd. So most of them are not able to express how they feel.”

Despite the positive outcomes these interventions may have had, students alluded to the fact that the OSCA team needed to have more efficient strategies in reaching out to them and to tailor these efforts specifically to their needs. The following subsection examines the steps the units took to successfully engage students outside the classroom to enhance their learning experiences.

Engagement

According to Pomerantz (2006), student engagement is purposefully involving students in the process of learning through specific and deliberate behaviours that can directly impact student learning outcomes. Thus, ensuring student engagement in all activities is key to fostering real learning and growth. The outcomes of student engagement abound in higher education literature: student identity development (Baxter Magolda, 1992), social capital development (Harper, 2008), and student persistence and graduation (Astin, 1975; Tinto, 1993, 2005; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005). Thus, for the OSCA team, designing strategies to keep students engaged when they could no longer assemble physically was crucial in its responses during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Through virtual town halls organised by the SLE team, students were able to seek redress for their unique challenges including the difficulty of doing schoolwork online (particularly balancing demanding academic and home deliverables), inadequate internet bandwidth, and the difficult financial situations of some families. Proactively voicing out

their concerns and sharing feedback enabled students to directly influence policies and decisions that the university leadership made to meet their unique needs. For example, upon recommendations from students during the town hall, the Dean of Students held two virtual parents' town hall meetings to explain the various transition phases the University had experienced and actions taken, and to explore ways their wards could meet their academic obligations. Additionally, with the feedback on the inadequate internet bandwidth, the University increased allocations from 10 GB a month to 20 GB for all students to support their online academic work. They also provided housing scholarships for students who needed to find suitable accommodation for their schoolwork. In addition, the SLE unit held special remote training sessions for student leaders and club heads to help them continue their activities online.

The onset of the pandemic brought many disruptions to plans for student job and internship placements as most opportunities were rescinded. Thus, students sought the support of the Career Services team who worked closely with them to navigate such disruptions by utilising existing Career Online Portal and College Central Network platforms to connect students with other potential employers. The team also worked closely with employers to understand their unique needs to prepare students to remain relevant amid the volatile and uncertain job market.

By engaging with their Career Peer Advisors, students were able to communicate the exact areas in which they needed help from the Career Services unit. The unit used this information to hold career sessions on interviewing online and conducted online CV clinics to enable students to highlight their most relevant skills as they sought remote opportunities. Due to these intentional approaches, the unit was able to maintain its 90+ percentile career placement of the 2020 graduating class despite the volatility of the job market globally. These engagement interventions helped students build their self-esteem, gain valuable information and the confidence needed to access industries of interest and to find internships and employment.

Unfortunately, with little time given to send all students home because of the sudden closure of Ghana's borders and campus residences, some international students became stranded in Ghana. These students prudently engaged with the ODIP to share their predicaments and seek solutions. Thus, the ODIP worked closely with the affected students to connect several of them with the University's rich alumni network, parents, and consular missions in Ghana, through its Host Family Programme. The team also placed biweekly calls with these students, monthly calls with their host families, and fostered online engagements through hangout events for both parties to ensure their well-being.

For students, staying connected to their peers and the university environment, and being able to express their concerns were important aspects of engagement during the shift to remote learning. Students cited that (1) intentional platforms for dialogue and support, and (2) effective communication and provision of helpful resources, were factors that kept them engaged during the shift to remote work (see Table 4). However, (1) a sense of loneliness, social isolation, and (2) a disconnection from the previously lively campus environment made it difficult for them to engage effectively (see Table 4).

Table 4: Student perspectives on engagement

Positive factors	
Intentional platforms for dialogue and support	“Because I am on the [Student Council], I engaged more with the SLE unit. They asked to speak to all the year groups, and we suggested rolling out a survey so students could give their opinions about how they were faring being at home. The survey and opinion polls served as the main agenda items for our town hall meeting where students raised the discussion on fees. The town hall [meeting] we had was very helpful and resulted in the reduction of the summer school fee and housing funds.”
	“For the SLE I think it is the town hall meeting. They did so well in organising the town hall meeting to kind of get every year group’s perspective.”
	“I think the most important part for me is the town hall and what it can do for us during next semester. The town hall gives opportunities for people to air their views and perspectives.”
Effective communication and provision of resources	“The Career Services team has been of tremendous help in supporting me to secure a remote internship with a South African company. They sent several emails about remote internships and resources on interviewing and personal branding. That interview was one of my most challenging, however, I was prepared because I used some of the resources [the Career Services] sent.”
	“Just when the campus shut down, Cameroon also closed its borders, and we couldn’t go back home. The ODIP suggested to us the opportunity to live with a host family and connected us to one. They continued to find out how we were doing throughout our stay with host families to make sure we were safe during this pandemic.”
	“It has been so amazing to receive so much support from the ODIP team while staying with a host family. I am grateful for the stipends paid into our accounts, the support from my host family, who have become my second family after mine in Nigeria, and the regular check-up from the ODIP team.”
	“When we had the online school I think SLE did well. We had frequent updates on our timetable and assignments. That was very helpful. Each time you had [a] problem with a lecturer you could just reach out to SLE and they will help immediately. So when school reopened, I think SLE did a good job.”
Negative factors	
Loneliness and social isolation	“The transition was a bit hard on me because it just cut me off from a lot of things, a lot of friends, a lot of things I would have been doing at school. But it was like I got over it. I was able to recover fast.”
	“For some of my friends we adopt once-a-week afternoon Zoom lunch or Zoom snack conversations. I did one yesterday. We can encourage students to support themselves by giving them suggestions of things they could do to support themselves virtually.”

Loneliness and social isolation <i>(continued)</i>	“There is this App which people have been using during this quarantine, that helps you with what you are doing with your friends. It’s like a zoom type of thing. So you can share your thoughts. I was thinking that people could do it year group by year group or depending on those who are interested to help people come together during this time.”
Disconnection from lively campus environment	<p>“Other school activities that can relieve our stress could be looked into more especially. I think one thing that OSCA can also do is to send forms to us students to find out what kind of things we would like to do virtually. Probably [students] might be able to voice out their opinions and know what they want to do virtually. I actually wanted a virtual aerobics session.”</p> <p>“I think the most important things was the non-academic things that can make campus life more lively and engaging because like my colleagues have mentioned the academic burden hadn’t changed much. The workload is still a little stressful for everyone. And so this other aspect of social life should also help to relieve the academic stress.”</p> <p>“Now by going virtual, there is a wide range of things that you can introduce to make things interesting and you can target a wider range of students. So basically, we were just thinking that campus clubs could help reduce the tension and the stress among the student body.”</p>

This article provides a practical example of how student engagement can be fostered intentionally in times of crisis. Providing students with platforms for dialogue and ensuring effective communication enables students to address their grievances and provide meaningful feedback to enhance the provision of services from the University. It also enables students and supporting SA units to find more innovative ways of keeping students connected to their peers and the campus environment, especially in a time when feelings of disconnectedness, loneliness and social isolation are heightened. The final subsection will address the shift to working and schooling online and the specific support systems each unit put in place to make the remote transitioning process smoother.

Timely remote transitioning support

Considering that the University’s operations had not been previously designed for online student services delivery, Ashesi’s OSCA team was guided by a strategy that ensured accessibility, inclusivity, and equity for all students. It, therefore, adopted multiple remote access technologies to support student advising and engagement. This was made possible by the university leadership who provided monthly data stipends for all campus teams.

For students, the sudden shift to remote learning was a disruption, which required guidance from the student affairs team and the provision of resources to make the transition process smoother. Thus, throughout the FGD, students indicated that (1) timely responses and access to resources, and (2) time and flexibility, were factors that aided them in their

remote transitioning (see Table 5). However, (1) inadequate resources, and (2) heightened stress due to increased remote schooling demands, were factors that made the remote transitioning process more challenging (see Table 5).

Table 5: Student perspectives on timely remote transitioning support

Positive factors	
Timely responses and access to resources	“The accessibility and timely responses of the OSCA team and Ashesi University in general to students’ needs and questions have been amazing. I have friends in other universities in my home country Nigeria who up till now do not know what is going on because the universities are not telling them anything. My friends are amazed when I tell them I can easily email the Dean of Students and get a response in a few hours or be guided to who can help me. This has been very helpful in this time when we are not physically on campus, and everything seems to be in a flux.”
	“So I think that one thing that we didn’t mention as well is data. Data factor has actually been a huge help to us while working online. At Ashesi we used to have Wi-Fi and that was also incredible because most of the universities don’t have that. But moving away now Ashesi still maintains the Wi-Fi policy I will call it by sending us data and we have been able to effectively move online, and I mean nobody complains about it. We can complain maybe about internet connectivity but not about data shortage. That’s a huge factor that Ashesi considers and that has really helped us in transitioning online.”
	“For me it is kind of an honour to be associated with an institution that is student-centred and taking student feedback into designing what the university experience looks like. So for me, it’s a pleasure to be one of Ashesi’s. As we are being intentional in our planning and stuff, let’s not forget to incorporate a lot of human feelings into this, such as active listening and stuff. Let’s encourage our faculty to use active listening. If more faculty and supporting staff could do that actively, it will go a long way to help us grow as an institution.”
Time and flexibility	“At home, I am in-charge. I have control over my timing and other things. And I am able to participate more in some of these events.”
	“For me I will say we transitioning and doing everything online was very good on our part. We have been sent lecture videos and we revisit everything in the video. But when we were in school, when we go for lectures it is for the day. I mean, if you don’t take notes, you wouldn’t get the opportunity to revisit some of the things that the lecturer was saying, but here, we have the Powerpoint at our disposal and everything. If you want to revisit something you could go back and fall on these videos.”
Time and flexibility <i>(continued)</i>	“With regards to academics, what is working is that the online learning is really amazing for me. It is flexible. Wherever you can be, you can learn. That was flexible for me and I like it. I really enjoyed it so much.”

Negative factors	
Inadequate resources	“So I ended up sometimes not actually doing research and a paper because I discovered that I finished my data. I think that is something relevant we should note and it was a big problem for some people. Zoom calls take up a lot of data and more Zoom calls means more data spent. I think that bothered me. We should consider other options.”
Heightened stress due to increased remote schooling demands	“Some [lecturers] weren't considerate. Like looking at the pandemic, we were all trying to adjust, but some of the lecturers were still making it seem like we were in normal times and gave us more to do. This made it difficult for some of us to adjust.”
	“We got assignments everyday and had classes to attend. Sometimes you don't even know what is going on until someone says 'oh we have an assignment and it is due today'. That was what was going on. So I think that was what didn't work for me.”
	“Saying it was flexible and all of that, honestly, for me, it wasn't all that flexible. One thing too is that lecturers thought students were being relaxed. So, it was like you have workload coming from all angles. Most lecturers are being more strict whilst we are doing this virtually because they feel we are more relaxed at home. Your workload, therefore, becomes more.”

Students shared throughout the FGD that they required more flexible options to connect with the OSCA team. Thus, to adequately help students access the various support interventions timeously, the OSCA units adopted several forms of technology and creative virtual platforms like Calendly, Microsoft Outlook, Zoom, Skype, Google Hangout, phone, and WhatsApp calls, depending on what was most convenient for the students. These platforms enabled students to receive timely responses from the team and allowed them to communicate their problems including experiencing fatigue from their demanding workloads and not having enough resources such as data to facilitate their work. Thus, students successfully sought remote resources and support from the OSCA team to navigate the challenges of their transition promptly.

Discussion

While HEIs are figuring out how to navigate the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure their business continuity, it is important to understand how students experienced the pandemic. The findings in this reflective article indicate that students are (i) needing more advice to navigate the many transitions they are experiencing; (ii) reclaiming spaces and opportunities to engage and negotiate for policy changes and institutional decisions; and (iii) using technology to facilitate access to resources and support they perceive to be critical for their success. The three areas listed above necessitated Ashesi University's SAPs to consequently restructure their processes and services to respond to students' needs. This required constant reimagination and flexibility of their daily business delivery to students.

While students perceived some of these responses to have had a positive effect on their ability to transition smoothly, they also highlighted what they perceived to have affected them negatively. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Evans et al., 2010) provides an analytical framework to understand the various transitional experiences of the students. The theory offers a nuanced and informed explanation of student behaviours and experiences and allows SAPs to address students' needs in a more targeted way.

Self

The findings in this study point to students experiencing significant financial, psychosocial, and mental stress in an exponential way. According to Schlossberg's Transition Theory, these affect the individual's sense of self and their perception of being in control of the change they experience. To understand the self-component of the 4Ss, Schlossberg and Goodman (2005) explain that it is crucial for SAPs to ask if [students] are optimistic or pessimistic about the changes they were experiencing. Do they value completion and commit to seeing whatever they start to a logical end, or do they give up? Do they possess positive psychosocial attributes such as resilience and self-efficacy which can contribute to their ability to endure the change? In responding to students' needs for advice, the OSCA team assessed students' state of being through the lens of these questions.

Students indicated that amongst other things, the timely response to their psychosocial and emotional needs through the counselling and health units to help them navigate the transition, enhanced their ability to gain the needed sense of control. This is consistent with existing student development theory situated in positive psychology, which emphasises the ability of concepts such as positive emotions (confidence, courage and optimism), traits (e.g. resilience), and institutions like universities and their agents (in this case, the SAPs) to invoke, inspire and empower students to have a positive outlook on their educational outcomes (Strayhorn, 2015). Schlossberg and Goodman (2005) posit that greater perceptions of control and positive assessments of situations are more likely to result in positive outcomes. SAPs, for instance, proactively targeted their interventions to at-risk students with pre-existing mental health conditions, who had a high propensity not to reach out for support. Despite these proactive efforts by the SAPs, students indicated that more targeted communication and actions to other student groups besides at-risk students was needed because students generally will not access psychological and counselling services on their own.

Strategies

According to Schlossberg and Goodman (2005), strategies needed during the transition include identifying the support options available and how to access these resources such as information and other financial and non-financial resources. Furthermore, the individual's ability and agency to take action to mitigate challenges and develop coping mechanisms to face conditions beyond their control is tested. Gilbert and Griffin (2015) suggest that the assistance institutions offer can impact beneficiaries significantly. Harper and Quayle (2009)

further argue that while student engagement is the responsibility of students, institutions must be very intentional in creating conditions that facilitate students' ability to access and effectively utilise the engagement opportunities available to them. The findings of this article indicate that students seized the spaces offered them for engagement to proactively advocate for themselves and seek specific support. The town halls became a space for constant (re)negotiation for several academic deliverables such as number of assignments and extension of submission deadlines, giving feedback on what they were struggling with at home (for instance, their financial and living conditions), and putting in requests for support.

While students can sometimes appear as vulnerable, passive and incapable of advocating for themselves, this particular finding reveals a tremendous demonstration of students' agency to voice out their needs and seek redress and support to help them be successful. This finding also confirms the call for SAPs and HEIs to view students from more asset-based narratives (Adjei, 2019; Linares & Muñoz, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Students, however, elaborated that the remote nature of the engagement created a lack of human connection and social isolation, which negatively affected their sense of belonging and community. This possibly contributed to the heightened number of students who sought psychosocial, health and other forms of advice.

A fair amount of student development literature connects students' sense of belonging to their sense of mattering (Schlossberg, 1985; Strayhorn 2015), which is fundamental in driving and facilitating a positive sense of well-being and helping students to thrive. Sense of belonging has been attributed to several student outcomes including good academic performance, well-being, happiness, and good health (Hausmann, Schofield & Woods, 2007). According to Strayhorn (2015), students' sense of belonging must be satisfied on a continual basis. This has become a challenge for many HEIs who have had to close their campus communities due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The responses of the various SAPs to create spaces for students to continue engaging, process and develop strategies to cope with the isolation were, therefore, vital and supported by existing literature.

Situation and support

Situation refers to the assessment individuals give to their transition process and their sense of control over the situation (Evans et al., 2010). Several factors come into play in evaluating an individual's situation including whether the change is considered permanent or temporary, good, or bad, and whether other stressors heighten transitional challenges (Schlossberg & Goodman, 2005).

Covid-19 brought about a negative outlook for most students who felt disconnected and isolated, and experienced sudden and heightened financial difficulties from parents losing their jobs. Additionally, the move to remote learning and engagement exposed some students to significant barriers such as campus accommodation, cafeteria and dining services, internet access, and libraries as they no longer had access to these and other campus resources. The constant engagement and interactions from the students consequently forced

the various OSCA units to find innovative ways to meet the continuous changing needs of students. This finding supports existing literature which advocates the need for HEIs to also change their structures, systems, and processes to meet and support the changing demographics and situations of students which has further been complicated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Kinchloe, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2011).

As evidenced by this article, support for students did not come only from institutional agents like the SAPs but also from their families and peers. This affirms Schlossberg's assertion that support comes from multiple sources including those who work collaboratively on behalf of the students to ensure their success, particularly when experiencing any form of transition (Schlossberg & Goodman, 2005). The various ways students sought support also validates other student development theories like Mahmood's (2011) theory of collective agency, Adjei's (2019) capacity to hustle, and Yosso's (2005) community cultural capital wealth. All these focus on how students harness resources around them to negotiate challenges and barriers in their academic pursuits. Despite these support resources, students recognised that they struggled with heightened stress resulting from spending long hours online, and exposure to negative and conflicting news online about the pandemic, which affected their mental health.

The findings of this article highlighted the various ways students exhibited Schlossberg's 4Ss during their transition to remote learning and emphasised ways the OSCA units at Ashesi University responded to support the multiple transitions students experienced. The findings also suggest that all 4Ss of Schlossberg's Transition Theory must be carefully addressed by institutions to ensure students do not experience significant disruptions. The final section of this article will focus on recommendations and final reflections for HEIs, SAPs, and various youth development organisations.

Final Reflections

Several literature sources posit that for HEIs to be inclusive and responsive to the changing needs of their diverse student populations, the unique experiences of students must be incorporated into their in and out of classroom engagements (Freire, 1993; Kincheloe, 2008; Rendon, 1994). Additionally, Barnett (2004) argues for HEIs to reimagine their purpose as they face continuous volatilities, uncertainties, complexities and ambiguities in executing their business functions. A global public health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic has made these calls even more urgent. The pandemic has revealed the changing needs of students and the importance of HEIs to equally reinvent themselves and continue to remain flexible and agile. This reflective article presents findings that show that when students are experiencing uncertainties and crises they adapt, adjust, and proactively apply multiple strategies to support the transitions they are forced to navigate. The analytical framework used indicates that students examine themselves, their changed situations, available strategies, and access institutional support that goes a long way to enhance their success. While students actively seek ways to respond to changes, this article has equally demonstrated the need for HEIs to respond with strategies that support and positively impact student success.

The article also reveals the significant contributions theory can offer and inform praxis by providing a deeper and nuanced understanding of the student experience. This can inform the various relevant, timely and useful strategies and interventions SAPs can adopt to support students especially during crises. The students in this article demonstrated a proactive and strong agentic ability to participate in the decision-making process contrary to the sometimes perceived notion and presentation of students as passive entities with no ability to participate in their development. There is, therefore, the need for SAPs, HEIs and youth development organisations to broadly tap into the many assets students bring with them to the academic environment to inform the design and implementation of interventions especially during crises.

While it was not the focus of this reflection, it would be interesting to know about the relationship between students' transition experiences, the SAPs responses, and their academic performance. The findings of this reflective article are clear that for students to achieve educational success on university campuses, they would require not only the help of faculty but also that of SAPs who commiserate with them and understand their unique needs outside the classroom. According to Ciobanu (2013), "student services contribute to the quality of students' learning experience and their academic success..." (p. 172). Thus, HEIs need to invest resources into having a dedicated and committed team of SAPs who will complement the efforts of faculty to enhance academic success, especially in times of crisis. This study, thus, provides a rich empirical knowledge in the context of student affairs, development, support, and effort in that regard.

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Conflict of Interest

While the authors work in various capacities with the OSCA Department at Ashesi University, they declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced the writing of this reflective account.

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