

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

## Adaptation of Student Support Services Considering Covid-19: Adjustments, Impact, and Future Implications

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**Abstract**

*The global pandemic caused by Covid-19 has impacted every facet of our lives and challenged service delivery to students within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The Centre for Student Counselling and Development (CSCD) at Stellenbosch University (SU), South Africa, is situated within the Division of Student Affairs (DSAf) and the centre's reflective practitioners had to respond to the challenge of altering services to ensure continuous support to the SU community. The CSCD aims to provide the SU community with psychological, developmental and support services, with the focus on critical engagement, advocacy, personal growth, and optimising graduate potential.*

*The CSCD has been functioning virtually since mid-March 2020. Each of the Centre's five units had to respond to both the challenges and opportunities to adhere to social distancing and to accommodate students who did not have access to online devices. All support sessions – whether it be academic, social justice, career, social work, psychotherapy, crisis management, with individuals or with groups – had to be done virtually or via telephone. This depended on a student's choice and practical reality in terms of space, privacy, and connectivity. This article aims to firstly share the risks and opportunities of rapidly shifting to an online supportive environment, as well as how each unit within the centre had to adjust its functioning to ensure minimum impact on student relationships and interactions. It secondly aims to portray the implications the rapid shift had on the centre's practitioners and the lessons learned during the process. Sharing these lessons might empower other HEIs in Africa too. Lastly, considering the imperative shift to online functioning caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, this article concludes with a discussion on the implications for the future functioning of the CSCD.*

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## *Keywords*

*adjustments; Covid-19; disability support practitioners; hybrid space; student support; South Africa; virtual service offering*

## *Introduction*

Stellenbosch University (SU), situated in the town of Stellenbosch in the Western Cape province of South Africa, was founded in 1918, has ten faculties on five campuses and currently has 31 540 students. The student profile of the university consists of 64.3% undergraduate, 33.2% postgraduate and 2.6% occasional students with 44.5% identifying as male and 55.5% identifying as female. SU is known as a residential campus with active residential life. Approximately 30% of SU students make use of residential housing, while the majority are commuting students (Stellenbosch University, 2020).

Led by the Senior Director, Dr Choice Makhetha, the Division for Student Affairs (DSAf) at SU comprises three centres which together facilitate an ecosystem of support, development, and engagement. DSAf functions to accelerate student and institutional success and contributes to the institutional and national socio-economic transformation agenda. The Centre for Student Counselling and Development (CSCD) is one of the three centres within Student Affairs.

The CSCD provides dynamic, student-centred psychological development, and support services for students. Specialists such as psychologists, a psychometrist, registered counsellors and social workers have been carefully selected to meet the needs of the university community. The CSCD comprises five units that is briefly elaborated upon.

The Equality Unit (EqU) promotes collective action towards social justice and discourse regarding social asymmetries at SU with focus on HIV/Aids, gender, sexualities, and anti-discrimination. The Unit for Psychotherapeutic and Support Services (UPSS) offers psychotherapy, group interventions and social work services for students with psychological, emotional, personal and welfare needs. The Disability Unit (DU) offers various services to students with disabilities or special learning needs, including the development of accessible texts, advice about and access to support technology and innovative academic support. The Unit for Graduand Career Services (UGCS) provides student support in the process of entering the world of work. This includes sessions about careers, compiling a CV, exposure to network opportunities and job-searching methods. The Unit for Academic Counselling and Development (UACD) offers consultations, career counselling and work sessions focused on academic skills, with the aim to equip students with the necessary skills to reach their potential.

The five-level Covid-19 alert system has been introduced by the South African government to manage the gradual easing of the lockdown period and this article refers to the different levels of lockdown experienced in South Africa since March 2020. Alert level 5 was in effect in South Africa from midnight 26 March to 30 April 2020. Since the suspension of all on-campus activity, preparations were made to ensure that a period of online learning could commence on 20 April 2020 for all SU registered students. Academic and support staff remained acutely aware that the students had to learn in an unfamiliar,

completely virtual mode during this trying time, equipped with whatever software, devices, and internet connectivity they could access in the places where they were residing during the lockdown period.

To adapt to a shift from predominantly on-campus, contact teaching to a fully online delivery mode brought about by the lockdown accompanying Covid-19's spread, SU had rapidly generated pragmatic solutions for the complex challenges that our student body, staff and other stakeholders face. SU's Covid-19 Contingency Committee, established in February 2020, has been expanded in March 2020 to an overarching Institutional Committee for Business Continuity (ICBC). It is served by a Medical Advisory Committee, and seven workstreams, covering student services; staff; learning and teaching; communications; community impact and external relations; campus operations; finance and legal matters; as well as research. These formed the official channels of communication, ensuring students and staff remain informed.

The CSCD has been functioning virtually since 18 March 2020. Each of the centre's five units had to respond to both the challenges and opportunities while adhering to social distancing and accommodating students who do not have access to online devices. All support sessions – whether it be academic, social justice, career, social work, psychotherapy, disability related, crisis management, with individuals or with groups – had to be done virtually or via telephone. This depended on a student's choice and practical reality in terms of space, privacy, and connectivity. With the number of Covid-19 infections escalating across the country since the implementation of lockdown in March 2020, we assumed that online learning within the higher education learning environment would continue as the primary mode for studies for the remainder of 2020, along with academic assessment through online means. During the past few months, the number of vulnerable students increased – students not accessing the learning platform of SU (SUNLearn), students on financial aid, students falling into the 'missing middle' category in terms of household income, students who were previously academically excluded and students in the extended degree programmes, as well as students in university housing during the lockdown period. This had significant implications for the functioning of the CSCD.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, 20-30% of our students had clinically significant symptoms of psychopathology and needed psychological support, yet only about 25% of these students were receiving treatment. We anticipated that the international health crisis precipitated by Covid-19 would create additional psychosocial stress for students through the following risk factors:

- high levels of anxiety and uncertainty in society about the spread of the virus;
- disruptions in studies and the need to adjust to online learning and assessment;
- social isolation and restrictions on normal patterns of socialising and autonomy;
- interruptions to normal face-to-face student support systems and psychotherapy.

The shift to online teaching, learning, engagement and assessment was a blessing in disguise for many students, yet challenging for some, especially those experiencing challenges due to disability (Lyner-Cleophas, 2020). SU students who are disabled were reporting

challenges in adapting to the online environment and greater levels of social isolation. They were thus at particular risk for depression and anxiety.

The staff of the CSCD have had very little time to familiarise themselves with the nuances of providing online support and the constraints associated with it before they had to start functioning primarily on an online platform. However, this provided opportunities for experimenting with different online possibilities and testing a variety of technological support options to be able to holistically support students. SU sponsored students with data to allow internet connectivity every month and the CSCD staff received a monthly stipend to contribute to their data costs. Their office telephone numbers were transferred to Skype for Business to allow them to phone clients if necessary.

The following section describes how each unit had to practically adjust the last few months to ensure minimum impact on student relationships and interactions.

### *A Reflection on Innovative Adjustments*

#### **Unit for Academic Counselling and Development (UACD)**

The UACD offers academic and career counselling to registered students. The logical decision during Covid-19 was to move all the individual counselling, psychometric assessments, and work sessions to an online platform. Like the phenomenon of online learning, online counselling can make the service more accessible for many, but it can also exclude many.

The availability of devices and the cost of data were important factors to consider. Although SU tried to mitigate these challenges by distributing laptops to students in need of them, availing free monthly data packages and negotiating free access to SUNLearn, it was soon realised that offering online counselling presented with many potential pitfalls. Several clients, especially those who resided in rural areas, found it difficult to identify physically safe spaces where they could attend private online counselling sessions. They often shared small spaces with friends and family. Keeping counselling sessions confidential was almost impossible in these cases. The quality of data connections made online real-time conversations challenging for some clients. It was important to determine upfront with each client which limitations could potentially impact the counselling process.

When hosting work sessions online, interactive participation during a presentation could be a challenge. Having a co-facilitator that managed written comments of participants during presentations would be recommended. Interactive participation was also encouraged when a work session was pre-recorded and uploaded on the learning management system for students to watch in their own time. They were invited to send questions afterwards and these were answered during an online panel discussion.

Despite our best efforts to prevent exclusion of students from online counselling and work sessions we had to admit that it could not always be readily accessible to everyone. Self-help resources on the CSCD website were expanded with a specific focus on challenges related to online studies. Topics included: *“I find it challenging to manage my time”*, *“The workload seems more than before”*, *“I miss peer interaction”*, *“I am feeling demotivated,*

*anxious and/or depressed*” and *“The online assessment format leaves me feeling uncertain”*. These topics were addressed in short video clips and accompanying text.

### **Disability Unit (DU)**

Prior to Covid-19, from time to time the students requested varied ways of teaching, flexible learning materials and adapted assessments. The DU had to negotiate “special” arrangements with faculties, depending on the specific needs.

Using technology to teach was heavily relied upon during Covid-19. Chinyamurindi (2020) and Rowe (2020) explore the possibilities of students having access to inclusive technology in remote learning, which is positive, as technology can assist vastly in aiding inclusivity. A big challenge and risk was that some students could not cope with the sudden shift to online teaching and learning. The lack of structure, and the lack of face-to-face support systems was difficult for some students with disabilities and conditions marked by rigid structure preferences. Initially, bandwidth and adequate devices was a challenge, but most students with disabilities acquired their assistive devices before the first term ended, which coincided with the onset of the South African Covid-19 lockdown. Poorer academic results were evident with some of these students.

Consultations with students continued virtually, including the use of Sign Language interpreters if needed. Communication and contact were maintained through the use of email, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp calls and telephone calls. Staff meetings continued via Microsoft Teams.

### **Equality Unit (EqU)**

The EqU implements SU policies on unfair discrimination and harassment as well as on HIV/Aids and is committed to dealing with social injustice. Students and staff can report all forms of unfair discrimination, sexual harassment, gender-based violence, victimisation and abuse to the unit. To assist with dispute resolution, the unit also offers mediation services. The unit renders services to staff and students as well as training and interventions to combat gender violence and HIV/Aids (prevention, testing and counselling), and gives support with issues related to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and allies (LGBTQIA+) community.

Most of our services were significantly impacted by the alert level regulations imposed by the South African government in 2020. We experienced declines in the number of cases of unfair discrimination and sexual harassment reported, ceased, or very limited HIV testing and limits on the ability to safely distribute internal and external condoms on campuses. The impact on basic HIV testing and prevention services provides an interesting and concerning reality as the dual pandemic of Covid-19 and HIV/Aids continues to co-exist. Essential testing services and limited condom supplies were only made available by SU Campus Health Services when 33% of the student population could return to campuses in June 2020.

The challenge of lockdown and alert level regulations created the need to rapidly create safe and user-friendly virtual reporting tools, support, and services. Through the Microsoft SharePoint and Microsoft Teams applications the EqU designed and tested online reporting platforms which was only done in person pre-Covid-19. The ability to continue providing support, training and services through virtual technologies contributed to ensuring minimum impact on student relationships and interactions.

### Unit for Graduan Career Services (UGCS)

This unit's mandate is to connect our students to the world of work and to facilitate their transition from education to employment. We focus on optimising opportunities for students, especially our first-generation students, by closing the 'network gap' through extending their professional networks. It is a well-known fact that having an effective network is the most powerful tool you can use to market yourself and to find the hidden work opportunities (McGowan, 2013).

Two core services that speak directly to our focus required major adjustments. Shifting from on-campus career fairs and on-campus career work sessions to virtual career fairs and online career webinars was exciting, but also challenging. Shifting to virtual career fairs provided graduate employers an alternative approach to market their organisations and to seek new potential employees (Ådne et al., 2018). Our unit was invited by the South African Graduate Employers Association (SAGEA) along with 22 other universities to participate in the virtual career fair project. Training sessions were organised on how to register and navigate the platform. Training material for students was made available. For our online career webinars, Microsoft Teams was chosen as the preferred platform.

We initially only focused on pre-recorded career webinars to make asynchronous access possible for students. This allowed students more flexibility as their academic schedules and personal responsibilities at home would vary. As students adapted to the online learning environment, we started offering live webinars. The live webinars were also recorded and posted on the Microsoft Teams platform for students to access afterwards. Students informally provided feedback on the live webinars:

- *A few challenges at the beginning with sharing screens but the content of the session and the enthusiasm of the presenter made up for the lost time. I enjoyed every minute of it.*
- *There were glitches at the beginning. It's good that there were more facilitators. Please let us know when you have this session again.*

Students could log on to the virtual career fair platform on any of the three scheduled dates. They could also access the opportunities posted by the employers afterwards, as the virtual fair platform remained open for two months thereafter. We received some informal positive feedback from students about the virtual career fair:

- *I liked being able to view information about many employers in one location.*
- *The virtual experience was positive.*
- *I liked being able to apply to multiple employers from one location.*
- *The opportunity to chat with employers online was a good experience.*
- *Webcasts offered by employers helped me.*

## Unit for Psychotherapeutic and Support Services (UPSS)

Covid-19 has had a substantial impact on the traditional methods of service delivery at UPSS. This is because the unit had to ensure physical distancing to comply with Covid-19 regulations. Adjustments were made in the delivery of psycho-social services and food security matters. The shift from face-to-face to online service delivery meant that screening, assessment, therapy, referrals, and implementation of intervention plans were conducted online. Initially this transition was difficult for staff and students alike due to a lack of equipment or devices and data.

Due to the lockdown and the need to provide mental health services to our students, we had to embrace innovative ‘tele-health’ solutions and quickly orientate ourselves to digital platforms. The method of engaging with students therefore changed from face-to-face to online services through the use of digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, and telephone. Throughout the pandemic our staff provided services that include basic containment, trauma counselling, individual psychotherapy and counselling, support groups, discussion groups and food security. The first step in the online service delivery was to revise our ethical and consent forms to ensure ethical compliance.

The unit, as far as possible, tried to ensure minimum impact of student relationships and interaction. This was done through facilitating online support groups for anxiety and depression, grief, self-care, and financial management. These group sessions allowed for students to interact and form relationships with one another in an online space. Students shared thoughts and ideas amongst one another about a theme that was being discussed in the groups.

### *Impact on Staff*

This sudden and unexpected change in service delivery indeed put staff under pressure. They had to demonstrate tenacity and agility to react efficiently to the needs of the clients. Although CSCD’s staff are well qualified and experienced in rendering support to students, they had to acquire new knowledge in a very short time about learning in an online environment.

Simultaneously they also had to acquire new skills in online facilitation and mastering new software programmes. A different skillset is needed when one only has an online medium to gain an understanding of your client as less non-verbal cues are visible. Practitioners became more directive in their therapeutic stance and had to think more carefully about containing students when physically removed from them. Student clients also used the therapeutic space more effectively as they got to the depth of issues more easily. The time spent in sessions for many students also changed. Students would end the sessions after only thirty minutes as they felt they achieved the goals of the session. This might also of course be because of constraints around data costs.

However, to ensure that each staff member had adequate digital infrastructure to work from home was quite a challenge. Due to an increase in screen time, staff had to be vigilant about digital fatigue. For practitioners, screen fatigue became a real issue as the lockdown period continued. The work-life balance, especially when working from home, became a

matter that had to be addressed speedily and practically. The remedy was found within the flexibility of staff working from home. After online case discussions and team meetings, staff soon learned to schedule work and home time differently. This meant working early mornings, late evenings or even weekends. This also benefitted students who could now access sessions after hours and weekends. A typical workday could therefore be structured differently per staff member.

Some staff members experienced family deaths and this impacted them heavily due to social distancing requirements and the inability to traditionally bury a loved one. One of the greatest challenges is probably to be content amid uncertainty.

### *Lessons Learned*

Covid-19 changed the way we work in fundamental ways and some lessons learnt will stay with us. The discourse espoused by Universal Design for Learning (UDL), lends itself to flexible teaching, learning and assessment practices (Bruner, 2016; Burgstahler, 2015). This way of thinking about learning responds well to student diversity, in its broadest sense, and would naturally include students with disabilities. What UDL means is that learning materials are presented in various ways, by multiple means of representation. Students, by nature of their various ways of processing information, their strengths, and preferences, will have multiple ways of engaging with learning material.

In being reflective, it is as important to acknowledge how we have been changed during Covid-19. Incorporating UDL ways of thinking about student diversity and learning opens us up to being more inclusive in our practices and improving social justice initiatives. One lesson learnt is that disabled students are not a separate entity from the rest of the student population. Students with disabilities are a part of the rest of the diverse student population and by thinking inclusively about all students, no one gets left behind in times of pandemics. Many students benefitted from the flexibility around assessments, assignments and being able to listen to recorded classes again.

Staff became more technologically literate. The enhanced technological capability can be explored further in hopes that all lecturers can use podcasts when teaching and can incorporate speech-to-text technologies for a more inclusive academic offering. The adjustments demanded lots of flexibility from staff and managers. Creating a safe environment for staff to voice their needs and uncertainties was necessary to build trust and resilience.

In virtually preparing students for a world of work, the efforts to optimise our existing online recruitment solutions, like our career services management platform, should be increased. More zero-rated applications and websites would also be a game changer in the online learning and support environment (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020). Employers and employees must co-invest in sufficient digital infrastructures for staff to effectively work from home. It is also imperative that the Unit for Graduate Career Services collaborates with graduate employers to better prepare students for the virtual and online recruitment space.

Practitioners believed in having boundaries with clients but have learnt to be more flexible regarding this to successfully work online. Our fears about online or telephone counselling especially related to building therapeutic relationships, trust and support disappeared as we gained experience in online counselling. We learned that access to mental health support could be multi-faceted and students doing their practical on distributed platforms within South Africa could have efficient access to online therapeutic assistance. We did not have the waiting lists that are so common in higher education student counselling circles. This might be due to rendering services on an online platform. This brought about flexibility in service delivery where staff could conduct work after hours and weekends and did not extend their contracted work hours per week. This might be the most important lesson for us and will surely impact the way we offer services in future.

### *Implication for Future Functioning*

The African continent does not lack creativity and can emerge with their own solutions. Our continent still struggles with internet connectivity, accessible devices, and electricity issues, to name a few. However, this period forced us to collaborate as a country: students, staff, public and private companies, and individuals as well as governmental sectors. There were endless possibilities in terms of government departments collaborating with internet service providers for zero-rated data costs and students on financial aid schemes, like the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) could acquire laptops. Where possible, higher education institutions could make laptops and assistive devices available to all students. The use of no, low- and high-tech solutions remain options in educational settings in the African context (Chinyamurindi, 2020; Rowe, 2020; UCT, 2020).

The development of tailored programmes to mitigate identified risks through a range of interventions, located at institutional and faculty levels, need to be prioritised with the assistance of external funding. The building of partnerships with other entities in Southern Africa should be a priority. These interventions are focused largely around increasing human resources to adapt to the ongoing demands generated through the transition to online learning and the need to ensure that there is a diverse range of support options open to vulnerable students. One of the biggest implications for future functioning as a student counselling centre in higher education, is to fully use this opportunity to re-examine our functioning and to be able to, in a new normal, work in a flexible manner where the needs of our staff can be met in order to manage their workload and get their work accomplished. This entails investigating models where staff rotate, work from home and with flexi-hours to accommodate family life and the different schedules of students. Covid-19 accelerated a stronger move to a hybrid learning model and digital transformation in higher education.

### *Conclusion*

The Covid-19 global pandemic has impacted and challenged service delivery to students multifacetedly. The pandemic facilitated an imperative shift to online functioning for the CSCD and assisted with the creation of ample new opportunities. A great concern for future functioning is the economic uncertainty as budget cuts and the diversion of resources

to ameliorate the effects of Covid-19 are set to negatively impact higher education in South Africa. There is great apprehension for post-Covid-19 sustainability of universities and a lot will depend on what the situation is with regards to subsidy levels for 2021.

However, learning just like working, is not totally dependent on campus boundaries. With the necessary infrastructure, work and study can happen in a hybrid way. Covid-19 created the liberating opportunity to think what the future of higher education – and specifically rendering virtual student support within higher education – can look like.

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