

Saving the academic year at all costs? The brutality of an elite education system, navigating poverty and surviving the 2020 Covid-19 academic year.¹

South Africa recorded its first coronavirus case on March 5 – a 38-year old man who had travelled to Italy in a group of 10. The country would be on lockdown for an initial period of 21 days. As of the 26th of March, the SA government would use the lockdown to slow the rate of spread and prepare the health sector for the rising cases. The 21-day lockdown turned to months with the economy remaining stagnant for a large portion of that time – schools, churches, social activity all ground to a halt. This paper explores the effects of the Covid-19 lockdown on the country’s education system, drawing from four cases of high school and university students to explore the meaning of “saving the academic year at all costs” given the socioeconomic conditions for many South African households. In this presentation, I argue that Covid-19 has further widened the inequality gap and exposed the elite nature of the South African education system.

Sandile is a second year student at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He is part of thousands of students who were ordered to vacate their residences and go home when universities shutdown indefinitely. “Go home?” Where is home for Sandile? During vacations he ‘hangs’ around friends’ homes patiently waiting for the university to reopen so that he can be home again. The lockdown has meant he will return to the streets of Yeoville, to live from one house to the next while trying to stretch his NSFAS allowance until the next month. Sandile is among the students who received the intervention laptop and the 30GB data package dispatched by the University to allow for a seamless transition to online learning. This only piles on Sandile’s problems. He has to work from home, but for him – a home is sometimes a park during the

¹ This is a developing paper, at the time of drafting there were and are still developments happening at the Department of Basic Education and these developments will be updated as they unfold.

day and someone's couch by night. I do not know how to begin to imagine his academic year taking place at "home." Of course he has data, and a laptop, - but is that all he needs to start to progress with his studies?

Lindiwe is a registered first year student at Walter Sisulu University (WSU), Mthatha. She left Johannesburg in February 2020 with a bag full of clothes and dreams. After three weeks of wondering around Mthatha, she called asking if she could return to Johannesburg as she had not been allocated a residence. The following week saw a series of student protests around a numerous pressing issues at WSU. When students were ordered to vacate university residences by the end of March, Lindiwe had not attended a single lecture at her university. She packed her bags and returned to Johannesburg. Her first year university experience is shattered, and even more worrisome is not knowing what to expect of the online learning system.

Zenani is a grade 12 learner at one of the high schools in East London and lives at a nearby informal settlement. During the national lockdown, Zenani's family moved to the rural areas as it is much easier for them to observe social distancing there than in informal settlements. Like every matric learner, Zenani is anxious about going back to school amidst the pandemic. In addition to her mainstream curriculum, Zenani is taking an extra maritime subject because she wants to pursue maritime studies at tertiary. To do this, she must achieve exceptional matric results. To help, her mother arranged for a part-time teacher to tutor her during the lockdown. Internet access in the rural areas is poor. Zenani has to move between homesteads to access good network connection to access her schoolwork posted via WhatsApp.

Zolani is also in matric, and a boarder at one of the private schools in Johannesburg. At the start of the lockdown, term had ended and he was already home. The second school term was scheduled to commence on the 28th of March 2020, two days after lockdown started. In the following

week, Zolani's school started contacting parents and organising online Zoom classes that run daily from 9 am to 3 pm. Although most parents have expressed data challenges, the school is clear on the programme and it is business as usual. Zolani's mother is an independent consultant who survives on freelance work. During this pandemic, she has no choice but to prioritise data over paying school fees. In her many media briefings, Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga has made it clear that the final examination paper was set more than 18 months ago and had not taken Covid-19 disruptions into consideration. This means that any learner who remains behind schedule will pay the price.

These cases resemble situations of millions of poor South Africans across the country in this global pandemic. There has always been a gap between the basic education curriculum and tertiary education in what can be described as a huge jump to tertiary. This concern has been raised by many institutions of higher learning - evidenced by the almost compulsory implementation of the National Benchmark Test (NBT) that are still made a pre-requisite by other universities. Key to this gap is the legacy of Bantu Education of the apartheid system, a legacy seemingly responsible for the under resourced schools in the township and rural areas, producing lower quality learners than those in affluent schools. Hence the transition into university is usually harder. Compounded with this reality, the effects of the lockdown will be devastating.

Some of the historically white institutions, including Wits and UCT forged ahead with online learning during the pandemic despite grievances tabled by students expressing their unpreparedness to meet the demands of the online curriculum. These universities partnered with service providers to distribute data to all students with verified phone numbers and laptops to those that indicated that they do not have access to devices to enable them to study from home. The Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, backed this proposal to move teaching online to "save the academic year". While the provision of data and devices to students can

be seen as a progressive step towards bridging the gap, it is wholly inadequate and is far from achieving the intended purpose. For students like Sandile who only have the university residence as their home, evacuating residence during the pandemic was the beginning of an unplanned struggle. The contestation around the decision to continue with online learning took place on social media under the hashtag #SaveTheAcademicYear and #SaveLives.

When Minister Motshekga announced the phasing in of the academic year from the 1st of June 2020, it was met with mixed emotions. Teachers' Unions, Parent Bodies and the Basic Education committee were trying to find a common ground to ensure the safety of both learners and educators. Sadly, the loudest voices are those who can express their concerns at different platforms such as social media, yet the majority of the voices are represented through feelings of empathy - that might not necessarily capture the real concerns of the excluded majority. Grade 7s and 12s have since returned to school while the cases of Covid 19 continue to pick. Some of the schools are already being forced to close while the Department of Education is preparing to roll over other grades back to classes. This remains a developing case to be observed as many decisions are getting being challenged while others are getting reversed.²

The cases of Zolani and Zenani represent some of the challenges faced by the majority of poor South Africans. Many poor households depend on the school nutrition programme for their children to have at least one decent meal per day. The suspension of the schooling programme means that learners who depend on school nutrition programme will go hungry and put pressure on their already struggling families. With the lockdown in place, many blue-collar and informal workers did not have means of putting food on the table. While publicly advocating for the opening of schools can be viewed as being careless about the lives of learners and

² As of 02/07/2020 the Department of Basic Education reversed the decision of rolling out Grades R, 3, 6, 10, & 11 back to class and will be only rolling out Grades R, 6 & 11 on the 6th of July 2020.

teachers, it is worse for children to spend time at home with nothing to eat.

Moreover, as indicated in Zenani's case, for most poor people who get an opportunity to send their children to school, education remains the only route to escape the poverty trap. In the past few years, most historically white universities have cut the intake of first year students at universities to champion the idea of research institutions over teaching institutions. This process has seen most high school learners from poor backgrounds – mostly public schools being excluded from university entry. For Zenani and Zolani, the “foreign virus” presents less fear than the anxiety of seeing tertiary institutions progressing with the academic year while the Basic Education is struggling to rollout mechanisms to accommodate grade 7s and 12s. They would rather be at school to increase their chances of going to tertiary than staying at home hiding from an unknown virus. This is not to dismiss the severity of the virus and its devastating effects on the health system and the economy. However, it is to highlight some of the difficult choices that most poor South Africans have to make in prioritising their needs.

While “saving the academic year” is by all means necessary it has prioritised visible challenges such as access to a laptop and data. The question on how learners like Sandile are coping with everyday life, how Zenani is navigating access to the internet at the rural areas, how Zolani's mother makes decisions on prioritising data to access Zoom classes over outstanding school fees – these all fall outside of the categories of priorities. This was echoed by the Wits University Vice Chancellor Adam Habib's tweets where he tweeted:

“...if you not coping, you can do face to face learning when we return in a restructured academic calendar. But don't stop others from learning if they are coping. This is what you need to internalize. Otherwise you being selfish. You want to stop others from learning because you are not coping. This is not fair & neither is it socially just” (@AdHabb, Twitter 15/05/2020).

Indeed, the South African education system is for the elite, those with healthy socioeconomic conditions that allow them to adjust to changes and make progress. Vice Chancellor Habib made it clear – you cannot stop others simply because you are not coping. In other words, academia is for those who can shape up, for those who cannot, we cannot be held at ransom by you – so shape out!

This reality continues to characterised the South African education system. It is a survival of those who can afford data to attend online zoom classes and those with uninterrupted internet access because of their geographical locations. The cases presented in this paper show that the South African education under Covid 19 is a privilege limited to those with homes where they are able to study from and those with access to previously advantaged institutions of higher learning that can provide study resources. Covid 19 continues to reinforce boundaries of privileged and to define questions of access to education and priorities thereof.

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