Chapter 7
Exist or Exit:
Resilience During and Post COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis in Higher Tertiary Institutions

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the entire world causing every aspect of the higher education ecosystem to undergo a tipping point. The total mandatory lockdown resulted in all academic activities from learning to administrative activities coming to a standstill as institutions did not know how to go around it. Employees' job security, indefinite suspension of lectures, disruption of the university calendar, employee work-life balance, and business continuity were all operational challenges faced by universities during the pandemic. This chapter aims to establish the resilience strategies implemented by higher education institutions in South Africa and Zimbabwe as they strived to continue delivering services to stakeholders during and after the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Digital transformation as a primary resilience strategy enabled HEIs to implement online learning and work from home for academic and non-academic staff for university business continuity.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-1926-0.ch007

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic had a global impact, leading to a significant transformation in many aspects of the higher education ecosystem. Higher education institutions serve as the central source of knowledge for the progress of any country, and their sustainability and survival were jeopardised by the COVID-19 pandemic. The absolutely mandated lockdown culminated in all academic activity from learning to office operations coming to a standstill since institutions were unable to figure out how to go around it. Tertiary institutions encountered various operational issues during the pandemic, including employees' job security, indefinite suspension of lectures, interruption of the university calendar, employee work-life balance, and business continuity. Due to the crisis, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were compelled to transition to remote mode, necessitating rapid adaptation by lecturers, students, and administrative personnel to the new reality (Bartolic *et al.,* 2022; Biwer *et al.,* 2021). The digitalisation of procedures at higher education institutions facilitated the continuation of teaching and learning, as well as administrative responsibilities, through online learning, blended learning, and remote work, respectively.

BACKGROUND

Out of the total of 1.91 billion learners worldwide, 1.6 billion experienced adverse effects due to the closure of schools, colleges, and universities. This accounts for approximately 91% of all enrolled learners globally, (Gyamerah, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). According to UNESCO, the closure of higher education institutions (HEIs) and schools in 185 countries had an impact on 9.8 million African students enrolled in HEIs (Tamrat, & Teferra, 2020). COVID-19 has been a severe challenge to the higher education industry, leading to financial losses and uncertainty for many institutions, employees, and students as economies strive to recover. The worldwide instability caused heightened uncertainty in all sectors of the market economy, including the labour market, affecting students as well (Baker et al., 2020). The economic slowdown induced by the pandemic led to a reduction or complete loss of income for students who lost their part-time and full-time jobs, internships, or job offers due to business closures (Aucejo et al., 2020). National lockdowns led to a significant decrease in the income and financial security of numerous students and their families, rendering them unable to cover tuition costs. On the other hand, due to the tuition fee deficits, several higher education institutions lowered salaries or terminated employees, resulting in a decrease in the number of permanent employees. Several universities faced challenges in offering needed financial assistance to underprivileged and struggling students because of the decrease in tuition revenue and other funding sources (Dennis, 2020; Singh et al., 2022).

HIGHER EDUCATION BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

Education systems before the pandemic were traditional from the administrative processes to lectures. Lectures were done face to face where every student was expected to attend physically and hand in assignments as hard printed copies. The student had the priviledge of having physical interactions with the lecturer during and even after the lesson. On the administrative side, the application process of student enrolment was done physically with potential students visiting the university campuses to make the ap-