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Systemic Trust in higher education in South Africa: Policymaking during the COVID-19 pandemic

Thandi Lewin[1]# and Diane Parker[2]

[1]*Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, University of Johannesburg*

[2]*University of Pretoria, Centre for the Advancement of Sustainable Higher Education Futures*

#Corresponding Author: thandil@uj.ac.za

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Abstract

This paper uses collaborative autoethnography and document analysis to examine the policymaking process during COVID-19 in the public higher education system in South Africa. The conceptual framework outlines the multi-dimensional nature of trust and the complexity of policy-making. The paper argues that system-wide cooperation was grounded in a form of systemic trust that was possible due to the nature of the COVID-19 emergency, the policy context of South African higher education, and interinstitutional relationships that had been built prior to the pandemic. We outline the nature of cooperation, enabling policy directions to be published quickly, supporting institutions to act flexibly within a legal framework that created conditions for the relatively safe completion of academic years. The paper argues that the systemic trust that existed during this time provides insights for the ways in which leadership and collaboration can create conditions for strengthening public trust in the system.

Keywords: COVID-19; higher education education; higher education policymaking; South Africa; systemic trust

Introduction

Trust is foundational in higher education contexts and is a multi-dimensional concept, affecting every aspect of work in higher education as part of the fabric of interpersonal, and inter- and intra-institutional relationships (Bormann, et al., 2021). This paper explores a dimension of trust that is systemic, which, while related to the concept of institutional trust (Niedlich, et al., 2021), is not identical to it, as it takes place across and between institutions.

While individual public universities compete, they are part of a wider ecosystem, and their success and sustainability depend on engagement within this ecosystem. This paper argues that high levels of inter-organisational or systemic trust could be seen in the South African higher education system during 2020 and 2021 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. We set out to

understand and articulate what the forms of cooperation were, how they took place, why collaboration and cooperation can be viewed as systemic trust, and how systemic trust might be sustained for the overall benefit of the higher education system in South Africa. This is approached using document review and collaborative autoethnography.

Public universities face multiple challenges related to declining state support and growing public distrust (Lewin, 2024a). A lack of trust in the motives of South African universities, their managements and councils has been echoed in various comments by politicians and commentators who have questioned institutional autonomy and academic freedom, desiring more direct accountability from universities (Parliament of South Africa, 2022). It is also echoed in the questioning of the relevance of university qualifications by many in business and industry, suggesting that universities are not producing 'work-ready' graduates (Fongwa, 2018; Marginson, 2023). It is further linked to the calls for visible transformation in the HE sector, and a sense of disappointment about the slow nature of change in some key areas, including curriculum change, staffing and leadership change, amongst others (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a; Mncwango, et al., 2023).

This is not something specific to South Africa. Weerts (2016) writes that public research universities in America face multiple issues linked to declining state support and growing public distrust, and Davis (2021) submits that governments across the globe are questioning the value of public higher education.

The student protests in 2015 and 2016 related to the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements (Booysen, 2016; Daniel & Platzky Miller, 2024) in South Africa were preceded by a period of intense pressure on the higher education system. Access to higher education had increasingly opened up to economically disadvantaged students through the expansion of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)[1]. However, funding was severely limited, and many students accessing higher education institutions were not fully funded, leading to growing debt and hardship. The period between 2010 and 2015 saw the total student debt in the system more than double from R3.2 billion to R6.5 billion (Presidency of South Africa, 2015). High fees were preventing students who did not qualify for NSFAS, known as the "missing middle", from accessing higher education. Students also protested the slow pace of transformation and, in particular, the need for decolonisation of the university curriculum (Ntombana, et al., 2023).

Bawa suggests that universities in South Africa face a crisis of trust expressed in part through these student protests. He describes this as 'a rapid erosion of the standing of the social compact as guiding principle for higher education's role in society', linking the failures of transformation in broader society to a questioning of the purpose of universities and argues that 'a new social compact between the public university system and society is required' (Bawa, 2021: 179).

The shock of the disillusionment with universities expressed during the 2015-2016 protests forced systemic reflection on policy progress in the system and a move in some areas towards

[1] NSFAS is a State entity established to provide financial support for students in public universities and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges.

greater collaboration. For example, it was necessary for public institutions working with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to ensure annual compacts on fee increases. Since 2016, annual compacts have been put in place between the Minister of Higher Education and Training (hereafter 'the Minister') and the university councils to limit fee increases, while finding ways to support institutions through increased allocations from the fiscus. This was done in 2018, with the Government promising to increase funding to institutions to 1% of GDP, and the Medium Term Budget for 2018/19 to 2020/21 initially moved in this direction, but was interrupted by COVID reprioritisation, and not sustained after COVID (Parker & Lewin, 2024).

Collaborative policy processes implemented after #FeesMustFall were also focused on how university staff and students could be supported to succeed, and a changing conception of transformation in the system through the development of the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) and Grant (UCDG) (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2020). Through individual grants to universities, the UCDG supported the transformation efforts of universities in supporting student success, the development of academic staff to support teaching and research development (linked also to demographic transformation) and curriculum transformation. In addition to individual institutional grants, the UCDG supports a range of national programmes to support the development of university staff, including the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP), the University Staff Doctoral Programme (USDP), the Future Professors' Programme (FPP), and the Higher Education Leadership and Management Programme (HELMP). Further to this, it incorporates system-wide collaborative grants that assist universities to work collectively to support system goals, such as the Entrepreneurship Development in Higher Education (EDHE) programme and the Engineering Educators' Programme. These programmes were funded through the earmarked grants portion of the higher education subsidy and supported through the collaborative work between universities and the Department.

Departmental officials regularly attended meetings of the key communities of practice and strategy groups within Universities South Africa (USAf)[2], which enabled regular communication between the government and the leadership of universities. We argue that these relationships laid a foundation for the systemic trust which enabled policy cooperation during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than proposing new theories of trust, this article links trust as a key component of policymaking in higher education.

Policy and system dimensions of trust in South African higher education

Trust relationships are critical for an effective and responsive higher education sector, as students enter university with some level of trust in the quality of teaching and learning and the curricula. They expect to encounter a safe and affirming environment and learning that will be relevant to

[2] Universities South Africa (USAf) is the representative body of public university vice-chancellors and also provides a range of strategy groups and communities of practice and links professionals across the public university system, such as Registrars, finance executives, HR practitioners, research executives etc. A similar organisation exists to represent Principals of public TVET colleges (SAPCO).

their future working lives. Teaching in higher education when trust exists provides a conducive environment for learning (Zhou, 2023).

Trust is implied in the notion of universities promoting the public good. Magadla asks, 'What does it mean to think about higher education and trust at a moment of deepening political, social, economic and psychological crisis in South Africa and the world?' (2024). This is deeply linked to the questioning of the roles of public universities in a rapidly changing world and the growing emphasis on what universities ought to do in the service of society (Brink, 2021). The possibility of a strengthened public trust relationship in higher education was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic as scientists and universities across the world worked cooperatively to support their public health systems and to develop vaccines at a record rate (Parker, 2022).

We understand systemic trust as embedded in the ideal working relationships that should exist between universities and the institutions that are supporting, funding and monitoring them, in order for the system to function well. It includes the leadership and governance structures of public universities themselves, which are the public face of the universities, and organisations such as government departments, quality assurance bodies, and other public organisations responsible for supporting and monitoring them. This is a dimension of trust that goes beyond a single institution.

South Africa has a relatively small public university system with only 26 public universities and approximately 1.1 million students, and relies significantly on both vertical trust (codified through regulation, policy steering and funding from the State) and horizontal forms of trust, between universities and organisations operating in the system, who should collaborate to achieve their goals. "Systemic" is a conceptual lens developed through the policy intent to create a single unified public higher education system (Minister of Education, 1997; Republic of South Africa, 1997), which was, and remains, a key policy goal for post-apartheid higher education. Our focus is primarily on the public system, but private higher education institutions are also conceptualised as part of the system. The "system" is made up of the institutions themselves, represented in various ways through sector collaborative bodies; the DHET, which leads the development of policy, provides the bulk of funding for the system through subsidies and support for student tuition fees, and monitors the system through various reporting requirements; the Council on Higher Education (CHE) which plays a quality assurance and advisory role in the system; and other structures such as student organisations and labour unions.

Systemic trust is also assumed in policy. The National Development Plan (NDP) is premised on key ideas of universities as training for high-level skills in employment, producing new knowledge for society, and strengthening equity, social justice and democracy (National Planning Commission, 2012). The NDP assumes a level of social and political trust in the extrinsic and intrinsic value of universities.

Public universities, as recipients of public funds, are trusted to spend funds as they are intended. Despite a high reliance on State funding, public universities in South Africa have relative autonomy in their use of funds. The block grant portion of the State subsidy to universities, which makes up the vast proportion of funds transferred to institutions (currently 87% overall), is

provided to institutions as discretionary funding (Minister of Higher Education and Training, 2022). The block grant is, however, premised on sector-wide agreements on enrolment plans, which are the basis for the distribution of the subsidy across institutions (Minister of Higher Education and Training, 2022). The formula used to distribute the funding is transparent, and budgets are communicated to institutions on the basis of annual Ministerial Statements, which provide details of funding for the following year with estimates for the following two-year period, providing a level of certainty to institutions. A certain level of systemic trust must be in place for the funding framework to be effective. The Councils of public universities need to demonstrate strong ethical governance principles for society and the State to trust that public funds are effectively managed and spent appropriately. The Department monitors the financial and governance performance of public universities through the Reporting Regulations (Minister of Higher Education and Training, 2014), which require regular reporting by universities to the Department. Importantly, the reporting also enables the Department to account to Parliament on the overall performance of the public university system.

As originally proposed by the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), the model framing the relationship between the State and institutions was described as a variant of the 'state supervision' model, where 'higher education should be steered, flexibly and responsively, in line with broad national goals' (National Commission for Higher Education, 1996: 12).

New legislation and governance mechanisms were introduced at the system level 'in the spirit of cooperative governance …' to 'transcend the adversarial relations between state and civil society arising from the apartheid era' (Department of Higher Education and Training, 1997: 3.10 and 3.6). The co-operative governance model is built into the university council structure with a requirement for both internal and external expertise and representivity of a range of stakeholders who must act in the best interests of the institution. The Minister has the power to act when an institution is being badly governed. The Minister also has extensive regulatory powers over private institutions and how they can operate.

Our understanding of policy is drawn from the field of policy sociology, recognising that policymaking is a non-linear set of processes (Sutton, 1999) and involves different actors and processes of contestation (Ozga, 2021). In this way, policy goes beyond policy texts and includes discourses and varied layers of understanding and implementation (Ball, 2008). In particular, we focused on policy actors, understood as part of a tertiary ecosystem (Hazelkorn & Locke, 2023). Policy processes involve many active participants who can be described as part of policy networks. Policy is 'struggled over' (Ozga, 2000: 1), incorporating negotiation and contestation amongst different groups of actors, and understood in the form of processes and discourses. As policy scholars have noted, policymaking does not follow a rational linear process (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2021). This means that researching policy requires that we look at the context of policymaking, the actors/networks participating in the discussions and the structural relationships that make up the policymaking process. We try, in this article, as insiders

to the policymaking process, to bridge the gap between the hidden contestations and cooperation that inform policy and the outcomes of those processes.

Stilwell suggests that trust can be understood by looking at it as a 'system composed of many independent yet interrelated and interconnected factors' (2008). He uses an iceberg metaphor to explain this idea of systemic structures of trust. The levels of trust that can be seen above the surface are underpinned by sub-structures made up of systemic structures of trust and patterns of trustworthy behaviour that are not always visible above the surface (See Figure 1).

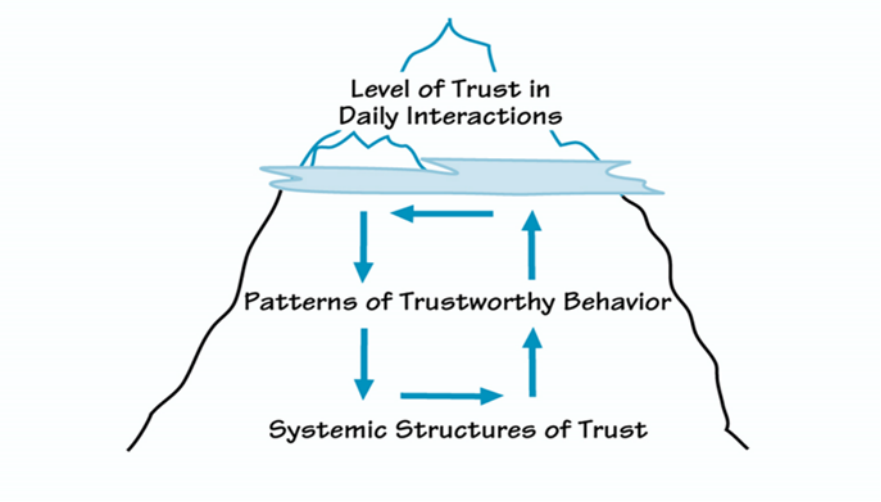

Figure 1: Systemic Structures of Trust (Stilwell, 2008)

Here we see the level of trust invested in people and/or organisations on a day-to-day basis, as being based on underlying patterns of trustworthy behaviour, built over periods of time, which enables the individuals/ institutions to undertake risks that otherwise would not be considered possible, and creates the conditions for productive collaboration and cooperation in the interests of all. These patterns become embedded over time in the culture of institutions. They become systemic.

We draw on this idea of institutional and inter-institutional trust to explain the links between the systemic structures of trust (policy foundations and organisations playing their core roles) and the collaborative patterns of behaviour that were built into the system prior to COVID, where effort, political will and meaningful interaction supported developments in the system.

Through the data presented in this article, we outline some of the key policy developments during the COVID pandemic to spotlight some of the patterns and relationships that are hidden from view but underlie the levels of systemic trust that are shown in what actually took place.

Methodology

The paper uses an interpretive collaborative autoethnography (Denzin, 2014; Chang, et al., 2016) of two former civil servants working in the national DHET, with responsibility for the oversight of the higher education system in South Africa during the COVID pandemic. As officials working in

the Department, we had responsibility for the development of policy, monitoring policy implementation through reporting mechanisms, and the funding of public higher education institutions, amongst other responsibilities. Our job was to support universities and hold them accountable for the use of public funds. This required close working relationships with leaders and organisations in the system and provided us with a unique insider perspective of policy-making processes. During COVID, the working relationships were key to making decisions under pressure.

The data is drawn from policy analysis and a review of policy debates and discussions in the public domain; literature on the COVID period in South Africa; policy documents and guidelines produced; records of parliamentary proceedings; and personal reflections. We use autoethnography by bringing together our own recollections of the work we were involved with as civil servants during this period to develop a self-reflective (Roy & Uekusa, 2020) narrative about the systemic aspects of collaboration during the COVID pandemic. This is an understanding of autoethnography where the 'researcher is simultaneously the instrument and the data source' (Chang, et al., 2016: 22).

We engaged in discussions to reflect on our work during the COVID period, while looking through emails and document folders to reconstruct events that took place at the time. We developed timelines of particular processes from our diaries, discussed the processes leading up to key decisions (such as the development and formal publication of Directions in the Government Gazette), read presentations and reports to parliament where we summarised work being done across all universities, and searched for public documentation that would provide evidence of the work done during the COVID period. The timelines, reports, and briefing notes were used as 'textual artefacts' (Chang, 2016). We then selected aspects of the policy discussions and decisions made at the systemic level where we would be able to combine our insider knowledge of policy processes with the publicly known results of the process. We 'openly acknowledge (our) personal memory as a primary source of information' (Chang, 2016: 71). This is part of an interest in making policy discussions and processes more accessible, as much of what happens takes place behind closed doors. We recognise, as former practitioners attempting scholarly reflection, that we are simultaneously writing from a position of 'being in' while also'getting out', which can be described as a 'liminal' space (Stevens-Wood & Attfield, 2024).

Findings: the COVID period and the systemic higher education response

In early March 2020, the news from the World Health Organisation (WHO) that a new virus (named SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19) had been declared a pandemic (World Health Organisation, 2020), sent shock waves across the country. The academic year had only just commenced, and there was growing concern about what this pandemic would mean for post-school education and training (PSET) institutions[3]. The system faced an unprecedented challenge, requiring

[3] South Africa has a Department of Higher Education and Training which includes responsibility for universities, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, and adult and community

immediate decision-making, driven by the urgent challenge of ensuring the safety of staff and students. The response of the sector was strongly coordinated and collaborative, as the details below will show. It was guided by national government frameworks for managing the pandemic on the one hand, but also by collaborative discussions and joint decision-making within the sector between leadership in government, institutions and support organisations.

This section focuses on outlining some key policy decisions made during 2020 and 2021, attempting to show how decisions were made in a collaborative way. This is done by outlining how the organisations and relationships that formed part of a policy network worked together. In our experience, even when information is publicly available, insider policy perspectives can make policy processes and participants more visible. The section focuses on five main areas of policymaking: decisions about the form and structure of the academic year; the phased reopening of campuses; financial support for the pandemic response; reporting and accountability; and forms of inter-institutional support.

Responding to COVID: Decision-making about the form of the academic year

The President of the Republic of South Africa made a national announcement on the decision to declare a state of disaster (Presidency of South Africa, 2020) on 15 March. The Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation called an urgent meeting, on 17 March 2020, with key PSET stakeholders including officials from the DHET, the vice-chancellors of public universities, represented by Universities South Africa (USAf), the principals of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges represented by SACPO (South African College Principals Organisation), Higher Health (HH) a health services and support organisation working across the PSET system, the national student organisations operating in the TVET and university system, the South African Union of Students (SAUS), South African TVET Students Association (SATVETSA), and, recognised labour unions operating in the system, NEHAWU (National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union) and NTEU (National Tertiary Education Union). This turned out to be the first of many stakeholder meetings to take place during the worst period of the pandemic, which were subsequently held as part of a Ministerial Task Team (MTT), chaired by the Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training. The MTT allowed for continuous engagement between the key organisations and policy actors in the post-school education and training system and for policy decisions to be debated during the pandemic.

A collective decision was made at the meeting to move the upcoming student recesses across all institutions in the PSET system forward to begin on 18 March, which was a week earlier than planned, and to advise students to travel home. The following week, the President announced that a nationwide hard lockdown would be enforced for three weeks from 26 March to 16 April. Institutions agreed, in order to save lives and prevent the spread of the virus, to send all students home with the exception of a few international, postgraduate and other students who could not get back to their primary residences, and close for all but essential services. All

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education as well as skills development initiatives. Collectively these are referred to as "post-school" education and training.

international travel and exchange came to a halt, and the government worked with other governments to ensure the safe return of South African students studying outside the country.

The closure of universities took place within a broader context of the national state of disaster and the Disaster Management Act (Government of South Africa, 2002), which was used to develop policy tools to manage the pandemic. While aspects of the South African government response were heavily criticised at the time (Naudé & Cameron, 2021), the response in the higher education sector received a more generous critique, as universities were able to manage their responses to the pandemic within a framework that allowed for some flexibility and contextually differentiated responses (Van Schalkwyk, 2021).

By early April 2020, it was recognised that the majority of staff and students would have to work remotely for a large part of 2020. Institutions would need to move to emergency remote teaching and learning strategies. The DHET worked with USAf and the Council on Higher Education (CHE) to consider ways of supporting institutions to ensure that the academic year could be successfully completed while ensuring the health and safety of staff and students. A small task team was set up, consisting of the leadership of the CHE, USAf, and DHET, to consider different scenarios for what could occur and to feed information back to the MTT for discussion and to create a shared understanding of the challenges.

An intensive period of planning began immediately to prepare for a move to 'emergency remote multimodal teaching and learning' (Joseph, et al., 2022; Hodges, et al., 2024), which would be necessary to ensure continuity of the academic year. The task team identified a number of principles that would guide decision-making: save lives; save the academic year; and that these two must be done in a way that ensured students were provided with the best possible opportunity to succeed.

By the end of April 2020, a national plan for saving the academic year had been developed and consulted with all the key stakeholders at the MTT. This plan recognised the different contexts being faced by universities, and that some may be able to resume activities online, while others would need to use other methodologies for emergency remote teaching and learning. There was also recognition that, even within institutions where online learning would be possible, there would be students who would not be able to access what was offered due to a lack of connectivity, or who would be living in environments inconducive to learning and studying. It was therefore recognised early on that a flexible approach was required and that different institutions, and within institutions different groups of students, may complete the academic year at different times. Hence, a number of scenarios were built into the plan that would be dependent on the course the pandemic took and what the scientists advised.

The DHET, working with the Association of South African University Directors of Information Technology (ASAUDIT[4]), undertook an urgent survey of universities to understand their readiness to deliver online teaching and learning from an ICT perspective, including access to devices. The report was submitted to the Department on 25 March, the day before the lockdown began, and

[4] ASAUDIT is now called Higher Education Information Technology South Africa (HEITSA) and is an organisation representing IT Directors working in the university sector.

unsurprisingly outlined a wide disparity between institutions in terms of readiness to deliver online teaching and learning. Major issues highlighted included a lack of funding for remote connectivity, a lack of devices for students and staff and low adoption and maturity of systems and platforms (ASAUDIT, 2020). The report made it clear that universities would require urgent support to navigate the challenges associated with completing the academic year remotely.

In early May 2020, the DHET engaged with all 26 universities through a series of meetings, which discussed the key principles of the plan and requested each institution to develop its own emergency multimodal remote teaching and learning plan, sensitive to its student profile and context, as illustrated in Figure 2. Universities were requested to indicate what kind of financial support they would require to implement their plan. The three institutional contexts in the diagram are illustrative of possible combinations of teaching and learning strategies to enable workable multi-modal plans based on each institution's specific context. In reality, there were 26 different institutional combinations, each one unique and responsive to context. For example, one institution's plan was based entirely on print-based teaching and learning materials being distributed to students' homes, supported by basic cell phone messaging. Another institution was able to ensure that 95% of its students had access to online teaching and learning, and so on.

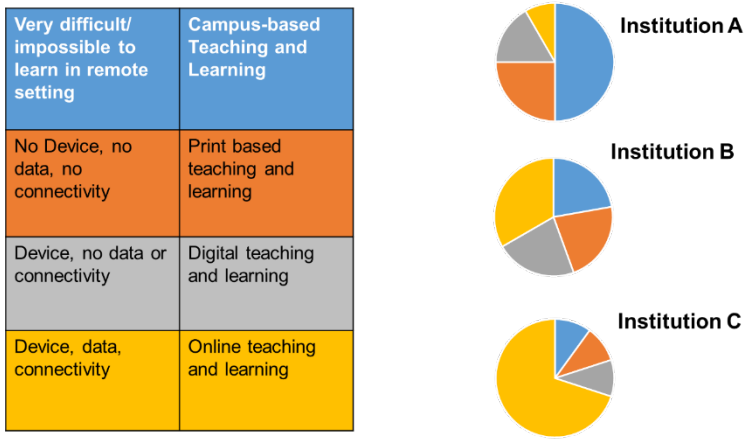

Figure 1: Multi-modal plans contain contextually responsive mixes of teaching and learning strategies.
(Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a)

Each of the 26 universities developed its own plans, which were submitted to the DHET for consideration for funding. The plans included a range of needs, including printing materials and delivering them to students, support to upgrade learning management systems (LMSs), data for students to connect remotely, electronic devices for staff and students, training of staff and students on remote teaching and learning methodologies, and so on. The plan enabled institutions to start teaching remotely in a staggered manner, with some institutions beginning as early as May and others starting as late as July 2020.

We do not offer an assessment of this complex period in terms of the real effects on staff and students in universities, as this has been done elsewhere (Council on Higher

Education/Universities South Africa/University of the Free State, 2021; Whitelaw & Branson, 2024). However, at the policy level, the collaborative approach allowed for broad acceptance of the tough decisions around the closure and reopening of universities. It took into account the inequalities inherent in the higher education system and allowed for high-level consensus with adaptable approaches at the institutional and campus levels. The work was enabled by constant communication between institutions and the DHET.

Reopening of campuses for a phased return to the academic year

South Africa adopted a gradual process of coming out of lockdown in line with different phases of the pandemic (levels 5-1, with 5 being the most severe level) (Minister of Health, 2020). This meant that a number of formal directions, published in the government gazette in terms of the Disaster Management Act, were released over time, initially to guide and enable access to goods and services during the hard lockdown period, then the resumption of infrastructure projects, the return to campus for medical students requiring clinical training, and finally, the phased return to campuses of all students (Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2020a, 2020c, 2020d, 2020b).

The return to campus plan, produced collaboratively in a very short time by the DHET/ CHE/ USAf team, and discussed and refined with feedback from the MTT, was linked to the risk-adjusted strategy, as illustrated in Figure 3, with each level enabling more contact activity than the previous. At each level, consideration could be given to students and staff returning to work and activities resuming on campuses, within the broader regulations set by the government on movement and activity. For example, once level 4 was announced, students requiring clinical training to complete their academic year could be allowed back on campuses, and infrastructure programmes could resume, provided that the health and safety protocols were adhered to. As level 3 was reached, so different groups of students would be able to return to campus and other activities could resume.

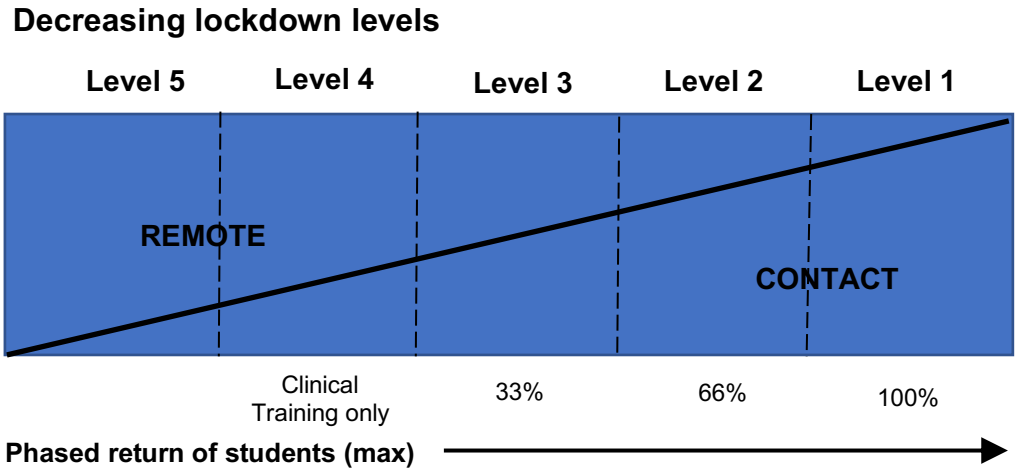

Figure 2: Phased return of students during lockdown levels (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a)

By October 2020, most students had been able to return, although those who were able to continue studying online remained at home. Most universities allowed students at risk, and those who could not study at home, to return to campus as a priority. This included students on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and those who required access to workplace-based learning programmes.

Most institutions implemented flexible academic concessions for students, implementing blanket suspensions on academic exclusions, and allowing for flexibility with a range of opportunities to complete assessments. The 2020 academic year was completed in a staggered manner, with ten institutions completing the academic year before the end of the 2020 calendar year, four by the end of January 2021, seven by the end of February 2021, and five universities by the end of March 2021. The 2021 academic year started late, but also in a staggered fashion, with first-year students starting by 15 March, and returning students with a staggered start depending on when the institution completed the 2020 academic year (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2020, 2021). Given the developments around the start of a national vaccination programme, general guidelines were produced for all universities for the 2021 academic year (Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2021a).

Looking back at the 2020 academic year, it is possible to distil a sense of unified purpose within the sector. An approach to higher education during the pandemic was based on the need to save lives, but also to save the academic year, and ensure that the lockdown and the move to emergency remote teaching and learning would not disadvantage students. A broader philosophy genuinely guided the trust relationship: saving lives, saving the academic year, adjusting to realities on the ground, affordability, and providing students with every possible chance of success:

> We are serious about our resolve to ensure that no student is left behind. What institutions are engaging in is emergency teaching. We need to reopen universities to allow high-intensity teaching to accommodate those students who were not able to learn online…We really have to foreground the social justice framework. It is not possible for us to base social justice on the fact that 60% of students can finish the year. (Ahmed Bawa quoted in Universities South Africa, 2020).

The sector benefited in a number of ways from the proximity of senior scientists within the university sector who were advising government on its response to the pandemic, the relatively small size of the sector, the availability of digital communication tools for decision-making which enabled meetings at any time of the day or night, and the existence of an organisation already supporting health services across the sector (HH), as well as the strong links between the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) and DHET which shared the same Ministerial leadership.

Financial support for the pandemic response

There were three key areas of financial support provided to the system to assist in managing the academic year. The first, and possibly most critical aspect, was the assurance that the State provided for continued allowances to students on State financial aid during the lockdown and extended academic year period (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2021). Students funded through NSFAS continued to receive their monthly allowances during the lockdown periods, whether they were on campus or not. The rationale for this was that, as far as possible, they would be continuing with the academic year, albeit remotely. Many, though, had to leave their student housing for extended periods. This support was critical to enable continued learning, despite other pressures that students faced, in particular, access to appropriate study spaces, and the differentiated nature of internet connectivity across the country. In addition, students were able to access additional funding for the extended academic year. Under normal circumstances, funding is provided for the ten months of the academic year. However, many students had extended periods of learning between December 2020 and March 2021 to complete the academic year.

The second aspect of financial support was the creation of a COVID Responsiveness Grant (CRG). This grant was put in place by the DHET to provide emergency financial support to institutions in two main areas: one to finance urgent requirements to support learning and teaching during the pandemic, and the second to support health and safety aspects of the universities' responses to COVID. Funds were reprioritised from a variety of sources to support implementation. All higher education institutions had to prepare teaching and learning plans to access the CRG 1 and back-to-campus plans for CRG 2 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020a). This intervention shows that in a relatively small system, it is possible to provide responsive short-term financial interventions based on specific institutional needs.

Although there were budget cuts across the government in 2020 and 2021 to manage the government's COVID response (National Treasury, 2020), careful planning and engagement allowed for some of the necessary funding to be provided to institutions. It should also be noted that there was some difficulty at the start of the 2021 academic year because of uncertainty about the necessary NSFAS funding to provide support for the full cohort of students in 2021, which caused violent protests at some campuses (Macupe, 2021). The anticipated shortfall in the 2021 NSFAS budget, however, was not directly related to COVID budget cuts, but rather to a more sustained problem in the budgets required for student financial aid, which had been ongoing since the introduction of the changes to student financial aid in 2018. The demand for funding on the scheme had exceeded original funding allocations, requiring regular negotiations between DHET and National Treasury for allocations to support the fully subsidised student funding policy implemented from 2018 (Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2021b).

A third important aspect of financial support was an agreement brokered between the DHET, public universities and private accommodation providers (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020b). A negotiated agreement was critical for stability in the sector to ensure that students were able to afford accommodation for an extended academic year, that private

providers who were without income for the periods of vacancy during lockdown were able to sustain continued costs, and that the extension of the academic year was affordable for self-funded students and those on State financial aid. The agreement ensured that, despite inevitable financial constraints for families, accommodation providers, universities and the NSFAS, the losses were mitigated on all sides. The agreement was brokered between the DHET, the accommodation providers, NSFAS, and representatives of the university finance departments.

Regarding tuition fees, the agreement was that tuition fees would remain as originally planned for the 2020 and 2021 academic years. This meant that institutions could rely on budgeted tuition fee income. It also meant that the State guaranteed payments from NSFAS for qualifying students.

This sector-wide agreement on tuition and accommodation fees was built from necessity, given the additional costs on all sides because of the extended academic year. However, it was negotiated on the basis of agreed common goals and because of relationships built between individuals in different organisations. It shows that even when organisational goals may differ (for example, student health and welfare to support success for universities, profit motives for private providers, achieving policy goals and affordability for government), groups can work together to mitigate risk and for mutual benefit. Ultimately, this agreement recognised the inter-dependence of the organisations in the higher education system.

Forms of inter-institutional support

A strong framework of support was put in place throughout 2020. This included legal guidance for campus closures and re-opening under the different levels of the pandemic; financial support for remote teaching and learning, and health and safety; health guidelines and tools for campus management; special frameworks and concessions to support learning and teaching; and negotiated concessions to support the academic year.

Higher Health (HH) provided institutions with support throughout the period of the pandemic in three major areas: health and safety protocols, communication and training for students and frontline workers. They provided regular guidelines to the sector for managing the health and safety aspects of campus operations. This included developing screening tools, managing and using personal protective equipment, screening procedures, managing frontline staff, testing, managing physical infrastructure, managing cluster outbreaks and a range of other areas. HH was able to communicate health and safety information specific to the pandemic across the sector on a regular basis because of the established relationships with universities and colleges, and because it had access to networks of HH student volunteers across the sector as part of peer education programmes. Given the close relationship with the Department of Health, HH was able to disseminate up-to-date information about the pandemic in real time and translate it into information relevant for institutional decision-makers. The role of HH was critical to the effective management of the pandemic response at all post-school institutions in South Africa. In addition, HH was able to respond to a range of needs in the sector. One example was the establishment of a twenty-four-hour counselling support line.

At a national level, negotiations took place with the telecommunications companies for zero-rating of all educational websites and lower data package rates for students, which were passed on to students through the universities (Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2020e). This ensured that access to data and institutional websites was not a major barrier to students when they were not on campus.

The distribution of teaching materials and laptops was a significant part of the pandemic response at all institutions. Though an attempt was made to distribute laptops through the NSFAS, the planned scheme failed to get off the ground at scale because of complications with the tender process (Parliament of South Africa, 2020). In the main, institutions that had included this in their teaching and learning plans managed the distribution of laptops and learning materials to students. This was a major undertaking for many institutions, and the sector saw considerable innovation. Walter Sisulu University (WSU) distributed laptops to students located across the Eastern Cape and in other provinces. Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) distributed printed learning materials and flash drives to tens of thousands of students. Staff at the University of Zululand (UniZulu) distributed printed materials to students across KwaZulu-Natal, including in deep rural areas (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2020).

The CHE played a key supporting role at the time of the pandemic, both to guide institutions on remote teaching and assessment, and to adjust requirements for the complexity of the pandemic conditions. Quality Assurance Guidelines for Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning and Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic were approved by the CHE in June 2020 (Council on Higher Education, 2020). This was accompanied by a concession that all programmes, whether accredited in contact or distance mode, could be offered in emergency remote format for the 2020 academic year. This concession was subsequently extended.

The DHET funded a team from the University of the Free State (UFS) to undertake a Survey on Students' Access to and Use of Learning Materials during the lockdown period (Centre for Teaching and Learning University of the Free State, 2020). The study aimed to learn from the experiences of students and guide the responsiveness of the sector. A major focus of the survey was on NSFAS students, and 69% of the almost 50,000 respondents were NSFAS beneficiaries. 24 universities participated in the survey. The survey was conceptualised jointly with the DHET, CHE and USAf Teaching and Learning strategy group.

A further complementary study was later undertaken to understand experiences and perspectives of academic staff as a joint project of the CHE, USAf and UFS, aiming to contribute to the emerging and necessary conversations on staff experiences and determine a way forward to guide policy and practice post COVID (Council on Higher Education/Universities South Africa/University of the Free State, 2021). In 2021, the CHE was also able to utilise data from the teaching and learning monitoring reports submitted to DHET during the pandemic, as well as the surveys, to conduct a meta-analysis of the COVID period. The project that took this forward resulted in a range of research, expanding knowledge on blended and hybrid forms of learning in higher education, though most findings remain unpublished.

The above are examples of sector-wide initiatives that required cooperation across institutions to respond to the unusual pressures of the pandemic and were outside the regular work of all institutions. They are examples of work that required the activation of existing structures and relationships and constant communication to be effective.

Reporting and accountability

Every institution had a COVID-response task team. Initially, institutions reported to the DHET on a bi-monthly basis on a range of issues, including the implementation of their teaching and learning plans, access of students to data and electronic devices, as well as health and safety issues, including COVID cases and deaths. This was eased as the lockdown restrictions changed, and it became a monthly report. Reporting was important for ensuring that institutions were tracking their students and for understanding what problems may need national solutions and support to enable effective responses in the system. It was also important to ensure that there was comparative data on the system and a single source of information to relieve the burden of reporting on individual institutions to multiple sources. The reporting was eventually phased out during the 2021 academic year once it was clear that there was greater stability and regular reporting mechanisms would suffice.

Over 2020 and 2021, universities provided numerous reports enabling a tracking of COVID cases at institutions, including deaths; access to learning support, data and devices; assessments and progress to complete the academic year; and other information that enabled an assessment of the support required by individual institutions to ensure the successful completion of the academic year.

The reports were used as the basis for providing feedback on the system to the national COVID Inter-Ministerial committee and Command Council and reporting to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee. The reports enabled the Minister and Parliament to access reliable data on the trends in the sector over time and to identify legal and health guidance and funding required, and to ensure that institutions did not have to provide multiple reports to different oversight bodies.

Discussion

Firm decision-making about the form of the university academic year and the timing of the reopening of campuses can be seen during the 2020 and 2021 academic years in the South African higher education system. A strong policy framework, led by the Minister and the Department, supported by decision-makers in public HEIs and public organisations supporting the sector, guided the key structural policy decisions during COVID. The frameworks were supported by official policy guidance and negotiated funding frameworks to support the core decisions. Central to this was a high-level consensus about the need for national frameworks based on social solidarity, but recognising the need for different institutional responses based on an understanding of the diversity across the system.

Other systems internationally experienced similar levels of cohesion. Pinheiro et al have shown how four key features characterised the response of most systems: rationality, cooperation, resilience and innovation (Pinheiro, et al., 2023). There is no doubt that the nature of the pandemic and the required responses had a positive effect on the policy-level decisions taken to ensure planned responses to the pandemic.

Funding was directed to support these decisions, providing support identified by institutions to enable their teaching and learning plans to be implemented, as well as to support equitable participation by all students, through allowing direct student allowances to continue to be paid. UNESCO has outlined how financial support was a key mechanism for higher education systems in supporting the immediate pandemic responses (UNESCO, 2020).

Reporting mechanisms were put in place to ensure a comfortable level of (meaningful) reporting, and extensive forms of inter-institutional support were in place throughout the pandemic.

At a strategic level, therefore, there was relative policy cohesion and clear frameworks allowing for institution-level flexibility. This policy cohesion is grounded in an ideal form of systemic collaboration, which is enabled by the State supervisory model in the higher education policy framework. The framework recognises the need for systemic support and cohesion, while allowing for different institutional responses. DHET provides policy steering and State funding to support institutions, as well as direct funding to support students to access higher education, and universities focus on their mandates of teaching, research and community engagement.

The majority of institutions, including universities, government (DHET), the CHE, Higher Health, private higher education institutions and private accommodation providers, and NSFAS played their core roles during this period. There were extraordinary levels of communication, support, action, focus and collaboration that enabled the system to navigate the challenges and successfully complete the 2020 and 2021 academic years by the end of the 2021 calendar year.

This does not mean that at the level of policy implementation, the cohesion was experienced by all. The MTT provided a productive, sometimes uncomfortable, platform to consult on all aspects of the proposals and plans before finalisation and publication. The DHET reported regularly to the MTT on the engagements to find systemic solutions for dealing with the challenges around health, safety, and the academic year. Student leaders, mostly due to logistics, were often not included in these engagements. The idea of a flexible start and end to the academic year, depending on institutional context, as well as the DHET's support of the multi-modal plans (see figure 2), was robustly challenged by student leaders, who felt that universities and the DHET were promoting a "two-tier" system (SAUS, 2020). These discussions were often brutal, with students questioning the motives of the DHET leadership, USAf and the CHE. They wanted to insist on a one-size-fits-all model (Deka Asma, 2020). The presence of all stakeholders assisted in brokering agreements that would later be published in the Government Gazette as directions. At the end of the day, COVID exposed and in many ways deepened the continued inequalities in South African society and higher education (Council on Higher Education, 2022; Czerniewicz, 2022). Despite the efforts by institutions to mitigate inequalities, the basis for

mistrusting universities remained in place, with continued frustration about the slow pace of change in universities re-emerging (Luescher, et al., 2023). The emergency response did not solve the underlying issues contributing to access inequality, the need for students in universities to be able to access safe, affordable accommodation and study spaces, ubiquitous internet and face-to-face support. COVID exposed major fault lines and deep inequalities that still exist across HE institutions. This continues to be a major source of systemic mistrust.

We argue that despite these areas of mistrust, the patterns of interpersonal and interinstitutional trust that had emerged prior to the onset of COVID-19, together with the policy foundations for collaborative governance set up in the 1997 White Paper, created the conditions for systemic trust to form amongst key institutions during the two years of COVID. The conditions related to the onset of COVID also resulted in shared objectives which facilitated the emergence of systemic trust: a high level of shared urgency and solidarity around protecting the health and safety of staff and students and working towards a successful academic year despite the challenges; the need for urgent short-term solutions and quick decision-making; the need for institutions to be directed by a national authority to provide legitimacy and avoid conflict on campuses; and so on. The short-term policy making required to ensure responsiveness to the rapidly changing context during the pandemic period made policy decisions simpler, resulting in agreed and consulted directions published in the Government Gazette over very short time frames.

Since COVID, a number of changes have happened that have undermined the stability and sustainability of higher education institutions, resulting in loss of trust and a withdrawal of many institutions away from collaborative processes, more concerned with their own position and survival. This includes sustained reductions in the subsidy budget, initially to support the student funding model, and in line with COVID-related government budget cuts, but more recently linked to a range of pressures on the subsidy budget, including planning for the establishment of new institutions (Sachs, et al., 2023; Parker & Lewin, 2024). The consistent erosion of public funding for universities, in particular in the earmarked grants, has strained the trust relationships in the system, which require stable and dependable funding and policy frameworks.

Student financial aid is a critical ingredient in the trust glue in the South African higher education system, as one of the most profoundly important policies supporting access, success and transformation. Trust in NSFAS as the implementing institution of government financial aid policy is at an all-time low. This is primarily because of implementation failures, rooted in NSFAS working outside of the higher education ecosystem. Even though many students are being supported and receiving adequate funds, there are too many who are not. The major problems stem from a NSFAS decision in 2023 to change the payment system to students without the underlying interoperable IT systems required (Lewin, 2024b). NSFAS directly ignored the pleas of public universities when doing this (Universities South Africa, 2022). The impact of NSFAS ignoring universities has been profound and continues to strain trust within the higher education system in South Africa.

Conclusion

A high level of interpersonal and inter-organisational trust was required during COVID to broker agreements on funding and fees, ensure regular consultation, sustain intense reporting requirements, and balance a national approach that allowed for flexibility amongst institutions. Much of this was unusual; some of it was remarkable. All required sustained levels of cooperation and trust, built on prior ongoing engagement and trust building across the leadership of different organisations working within the higher education ecosystem, as well as an idea of 'social solidarity' (Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2021a). Ultimately, we return to discussions at the Higher Education Close Up conference:

> Institutional and relational trust can be built through system-wide policies and practices, but trust does not live there. Trust lives in the daily practice of leadership (Eaton, 2024).

In writing this article, we do not want to be interpreted as celebrating achievements at a time of deepening inequality. Instead, we hope to have illuminated some of the national and systemic work that could contribute to an understanding of systemic trust, which, although complex and fragile, can exist within interdependent higher education systems. Building on strong interpersonal and inter-institutional relationships and a strong policy foundation, the South African higher education system can operate as a trustworthy ecosystem. Systemic trust, grounded in policy and actively promoted by effective inter-institutional collaboration, could be a building block for the levels of trust required to keep higher education sustainable. It is a starting point, necessary for effective collaboration and cooperation, but not sufficient to create long-term models of trust. More research is needed to explore the ongoing work required to ensure sustainable mechanisms for systemic trust to thrive.

We suggest this will require attention to the policy and funding stability needed for sustainable and trustworthy institutions; urgently resolving the implementation challenges of financial aid policy; and exploring alternatives to audit cultures that promote distrust rather than trust. In addition, public institutions working with the State and regulatory bodies need to continue to work towards achieving the policy goals for a transformed, more equitable higher education system, and to pay more attention to collaboration rather than competition within the national system.

Author Biographies

Thandi Lewin is an Associate Professor at the Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies at the University of Johannesburg with a background in the civil service, most recently as the Chief Director for Governance and Management Support in the University Education branch of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

Diane Parker is an Advisor to the Vice Chancellor of the University of Pretoria (UP) and a research affiliate of the Centre for the Advancement of Sustainable Higher Education Futures at UP.

Previously, she was a senior civil servant responsible for overseeing policy development and implementation to regulate and support the South African Higher Education System.

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