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Students get the opportunity to acquire 21st-century skills

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Last year was tough, and higher education will no doubt continue to face significant difficulties this year, but the challenges associated with COVID-19 also afford students the opportunity to learn crucial skills for our time, which is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, writes Wim de Villiers*.

With 2021 having just started, one realises again how quickly and drastically everything changed. This applies to virtually every aspect of our lives, including – from my point of view – higher education, and particularly the institution where I work, Stellenbosch University (SU).

When the coronavirus pandemic hit early on in 2020, all the plans we had made for the year were immediately superseded by just two overriding priorities – to complete the academic year successfully, and to ensure the sustainability of our institution. It remains an inspiration to see how the entire University community rallied in response to the crisis.

Team effort

Probably the most important development at SU was the rapid switch that we made to emergency remote teaching, learning and assessment (ERTLA). Contact tuition was suspended in the middle of March and towards the end of April, classes were resumed online. What we had been planning to do over five years (to gradually expand e-learning), we performed had to get done in five weeks!

This entailed a considerable team effort. Each person did their part – from the lecturers who had to convert their courses and the students who suddenly had to become used to online classes and assessments, to technicians who had to upgrade overloaded systems in record time and managers who had to keep things going, no matter what.

A major challenge faced by all universities from the onset was the digital divide between those with access to 21st-century information and communications technology, and those without.

We immediately bought 1 800 laptop computers and couriered these to students who indicated that they needed them (this was under level 5 lockdown, so we needed special permission for these deliveries).

We also provided our students with data in order to access the internet. The higher education sector jointly negotiated an agreement with cell phone companies, but this still was a massive expense. Fortunately, the SU Council could make reserves available for unforeseen expenses.

Foundations that support higher education institutions made additional contributions for the switchover. This enabled us to offer a variety of extraordinary interventions for comprehensive academic and psychosocial support.

Among others, training sessions were provided for lecturers and they were supported in converting their course material for online classes. This was hard work and they put in a lot of overtime, and sacrificed their vacation.

Students received many information resources, as well as additional language support and tutor sessions. However, it was by no means easy. Although many of them grew up with digital devices and the internet, it still required cool heads and flexibility to migrate to cyberspace a quarter into the academic year.

And just when we thought matters were under control, the lights went out! Load shedding in September 2020 could hardly have come at a worse time – when the academic year was picking up speed with assignments and assessments for which an internet connection was indispensable.

There is no doubt that the year took its toll. Our divisions offering psychosocial support experienced a higher demand than usual. It was difficult, and it is important to acknowledge that there were shortcomings. Otherwise we will not improve. We did well, given the challenges, but many students and staff members paid the price.

21st-century skills

However, there is also a broad silver lining. Students not only had to master subject knowledge – more than ever before they also had to learn to be adaptable, to deal with pressure, to be innovative and creative, to communicate and co-operate with others and to show determination and perseverance.

The year was full of opportunities to learn 21st-century skills – and this should make the Class of 2020 sought after in a labour market that is under pressure and is therefore placing a premium on the ability of jobseekers to handle the so-called VUCA challenges: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

Our summer graduation ceremonies from 14 to 16 December 2020 were a celebration of academic excellence that lifted our spirits. No fewer than 5 701 of our students received a sought-after qualification – which is remarkable, given the difficulties of the year.

We awarded 3 409 undergraduate qualifications – the most ever in this category at our December ceremonies. We also awarded 1 005 honours, 502 master's and 138 doctoral degrees – making a big contribution to the development of our country, our continent and the rest of the world.

Place and people

We have also maintained our academic excellence. According to throughput tables of the Department of Higher Education and Training, SU is still the leading university in the country in terms of student success. Our general success rate in undergraduate modules (i.e. students who pass their modules) stands at 87,2%.

SU attained the remarkable feat last year of being included among the leading universities in the world. It appeared in three rankings of higher education institutions – the Shanghai rankings, *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* and the *US News & World Report* rankings. Although our primary focus is on academic and research excellence, we understand the importance of rankings in the overall perception of the stature of an institution.

It has been predicted that residential universities will struggle as the provision of higher education online increases. We, however, are experiencing the opposite, as we could maintain our growth over the past four years. Total applications

increased by 29%, complete applications by 11% and provisional offers to prospective students by 10%. This is the greatest vote of confidence any university could wish for.

How does one explain this? With two words: place and people. This is what a residential university offers that cannot be duplicated in cyberspace.

Place – the total student experience, in our case in one of the most beautiful parts of the country. With the best facilities, unparalleled extramural experiences and an exciting student life.

And people – leading researchers and lecturers, plus comprehensive student support that ensures academic excellence in the classroom, along with stimulating exposure to diverse ideas in an environment full of young people from across the country and the rest of the world.

Hybrid learning

But we dare not rest on our laurels, because the world is changing rapidly. COVID-19 brought with it an online revolution, and universities need to keep up. This is why we are planning to resume with contact teaching as soon as possible this year – to the extent that the coronavirus permits – augmented by online teaching. This combination is known as hybrid learning.

Some subject content that can be packaged electronically in the form of slide shows, videos and sound recordings – material that students can master comfortably where and when they want, without having to attending class.

However, lectures and class discussions remain important, despite the complication of COVID-19 limits on numbers. This can be solved by web cameras in classrooms to broadcast lectures live, a possibility that we are investigating.

An increase in hybrid learning could also unlock another market for universities – mature students who already work and cannot enrol full time, but who can do courses that are packaged electronically online, supplemented with short block contact sessions a few times a year.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead said the art of progress is to maintain order in the midst of change, and change in the midst of order. This was our mantra last year, and it will help us go forward together in future.

** Prof Wim de Villiers is Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, and Vice-Chairperson of Universities South Africa, the body that represents the country's 26 public universities.*

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