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DRIVERS FOR FLEXIBILITY. THREE QUESTIONS TO MAUREEN ANDRADE AND KAREN FERREIRA-MEYERS

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The global pandemic has affected the lives of everybody and from all walks of life. The world of education is no exception to this, and academics have embraced online and blended learning to meet the urgent needs for increased flexibility in learning and teaching. In this interview we explore the experiences from two contrasting realities to understand the drivers for flexibility.

Maureen Snow Andrade is a professor in the Organizational Leadership Department at Utah Valley University. She has an EdD in higher education leadership and is a former associate vice president and associate dean. Her research interests include flexible learning, assessment, global education, leadership, and student access and success.

Karen Ferreira-Meyer is an associate professor at the University of Eswatini in Eswatini (the former Swaziland). She is Coordinator of Linguistics and Modern Languages at the Institute of Distance Education (University of Eswatini) and Research Fellow of the University of the Free State (South Africa).

Timo Halttunen: Universities around the world were, maybe surprisingly, quite agile in their transition to online learning when the COVID-19 pandemic started. Suddenly, there was a great demand for increased flexibility in the educational process. What sources of information did you use to understand what kind of flexibility is in demand?

Maureen Andrade: The challenge at the onset of the pandemic was to prioritise the health and safety of the university community while designing and delivering a high-quality learning experience. Both faculty and students needed to be successful in what was for many an unfamiliar teaching and learning environment. At Utah Valley University, we used surveys and course data to help us understand stakeholder perspectives with the transition to new delivery modalities and technologies. This helped us determine what was working, where changes were needed, and how to bring about those changes. A few examples follow.

We learned that students felt more connected to their instructors in courses delivered synchronously through live stream technology than in traditional face-to-face courses, but

less connected to their peers. This pointed to the need to identify how instructors could connect students using the tools in virtual conferencing platforms such as the chat feature or breakout rooms, link to external collaborative tools such as Google docs or Microsoft forms, or require virtual teamwork outside of class. We also learned that students thought faculty needed more training to use delivery technologies and faculty thought students needed more training. Consequently, targeted, accessible instructional videos and infographics were designed by the university's instructional technologists.

Another strategy for understanding flexible modes of delivery and their impact was disaggregating course data to determine performance differences across gender, ethnicity, age, and year of study. For example, females in live stream synchronous classes were failing at higher rates than males, first-year students were failing at higher rates than second-year students, and ethnic minority students were failing at higher rates than ethnic majority students. However, first-year students over the age of 25 were more successful than second-year students in the same age category and non-White females over age 25 outperformed those in all other categories. This information expanded the awareness of academic advisors and faculty members of variations in performance and the need to monitor performance and actively reach out to students, but more research is needed to fully understand the patterns.

Karen Ferreira-Meyers: Wow, Maureen, you did quite a lot at your institution. I really like the disaggregation of data. I think that can really assist you (and everyone) in redesigning programmes to respond to the needs of the students too. Before I talk about what we did in our institution (on the other side of the world, in Eswatini), let me add some thoughts about the question.

It is interesting to note that the adjective 'agile' appears in the question. Personally, I am not sure that universities were that agile in responding to the pandemic, at least not at first. It took a while for university management to act, but luckily there were, in most universities from what I gather, individuals (in some cases whole faculties or departments) who were proactive and put in place ways and means to ensure that teaching and learning continued. Nevertheless, I feel much time was lost at the beginning of the pandemic, valuable time.

Indeed, more flexibility was needed. While everyone looking at skills in the 21st century had noted the importance of flexibility, implementing that competency was another issues altogether. Who needed to be flexible? Who was flexible? How can we train people to become more flexible? A whole lot of questions to be answered if we were to be flexible enough to respond adequately to the challenges thrown to us in the world of education by the pandemic.

At the onset of the pandemic, we had very little data at our disposal to verify whether flexibility in delivery, programme design, materials' design, etc. even existed and who were the champions of flexibility, both among staff (academic and administrative) and among the student population. With staff, we proposed an online course on blended teaching. The way people took on the course (early uptake by a few, slower start by the majority, and then there are the laggards-behind, who we may not yet have reached at all, even after two years of the pandemic) was definitely an indication of their flexibility, and so was the manner in which they performed in the course (interaction in the forum and chatrooms, design of plans and materials, etc.). In addition, we were able to assemble some data via the Moodle features, as Moodle was our teaching and learning platform for this particular course on blended teaching.

It is clear today that we still have insufficient information, especially when it comes to flexibility and our students. In general, their reaction to online learning has been dual: some have been keen to continue their studies and have had a positive attitude towards online

environments, flexible design and modes of delivery, while others (perhaps the majority – this needs to be further checked) have been demotivated, discouraged and generally feel online and blended teaching and learning does not work in the context of Eswatini (Southern Africa).

Some lecturers (those that embraced flexibility early on) tried to find out how flexible their students were by asking them to respond to surveys, by having conversations online (forums, chats, videoconferencing) with the students about the 'new normal'. This has yielded important information that needs to be collected and brought together for further analysis.

Timo Halttunen: Part of the transition has been to come up with a solid plan for instructional design – and to systematically evaluate what works and why. In your context, what actions enabled peer-to-peer learning and sharing of good practices among teachers?

Maureen Andrade: The university's success at rapidly transitioning nearly all courses to synchronous or asynchronous delivery was enabled by the collaboration of support staff and faculty. With practice and ingenuity, faculty members identified strategies for not only overcoming challenges but for innovating in the teaching and learning space. The instructional designers and technologists partnering with them also further developed their skills as they researched new technologies, sought answers to questions, and collaborated within their own learning communities and counterparts at other universities.

The university's teaching and learning unit sponsored a number of conferences and workshops that focused on technology-based pedagogical strategies. They were in a good position to identify faculty members who had sought their help in resolving issues and embracing opportunities, and consequently, had become innovators, models, and mentors on campus. Events featured panels of faculty members sharing their experiences with the transition from traditional instruction to interactive live stream or online approaches. For many, these modalities were new, and some were teaching subjects they had previously thought did not lend themselves well to virtual learning. Now they were leading out and breaking old paradigms.

These community-building opportunities brought campus faculty together to share and discuss across departments, which had not occurred to much extent previously. The faculty were clearly committed to students and helping them learn. To do this, they found new ways to engage students. They rose to the challenge; this resulted in student- and faculty-driven change necessitated by an external force – the pandemic. The events brought people together; post-event communities of learning were formed, which utilized document sharing and chats using communication technologies. The teaching and learning office regularly provided information and resources on new technologies and pedagogical approaches. Participants received stipends enabled by federal funding, although external motivators did not drive the success of these events, but rather a desire to learn and support students.

Karen Ferreira-Meyers: There are always challenges with planning, one of the major ones being whose responsibility is it to plan. This is a sore point indeed as it made us lose quite some time again at the start of the pandemic.

There are three main role players involved in the planning that occurred during the transition from face-to-face to blended and online teaching and learning when the country went into full lockdown at the end of March 2020. These are: university management (led by the main officers of the university – Vice-Chancellor, Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Registrar, guided by the university Senate and Council), the Centre of Excellence in Learning and Teaching

(CELT) and the Institute of Distance Learning (IDE, mainly because of its long experience with distance and blended teaching and learning). Management gave CELT and IDE the mandate to work on strategies to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and to ensure that teaching and learning was not (or in a limited manner) interrupted. It was noted that blended learning (less than online learning) would provide a way forward in our specific context.

As was noted by Maureen above, it is important to set up communities of enquiry to ensure that whatever is planned also gets implemented. In addition to the course I spoke about earlier, CELT and IDE designed a series of webinars to build these communities, to allow for sharing of best practices (in particular on online assessment – this has been a very popular series which we started in August 2021 and which is ongoing).

Timo Halttunen: These exceptional times have called for resilience from academics and support staff members alike. In your opinion, what are the most important sources for resilience in the university community?

Maureen Andrade: Challenges, especially those as extensive as a global pandemic, typically bring people together. People share their skills and expertise to figure things out and move forward. As a result of the pandemic, probably every organisation across the globe was faced with the need to come together and determine not only how to survive but to thrive. The pandemic hit hard; it hit quickly; it required critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving, and immediate action. People's best efforts and best thinking continue to be critical to understanding and overcoming the ongoing complications and threats it has generated.

Higher education institutions are entrenched in history and tradition. They are not known for acting quickly. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be recognized as a rare exception. In the university community, sources of resilience include the expertise of the faculty and staff, their willingness to collaborate and learn, their recognition of the need for diversity and diverse skills and perspectives, and the practice of shared governance. In many ways, administrators, faculty, staff, and students in higher education institutions are prepared for situations which involve contributing their knowledge, skills, and capacities to resolve issues. They are characterized by flat structures and distributed decision-making as well as the recognition that all voices must be considered. Communication, collaborative decision-making, and buy-in are hallmarks of higher education institutions. This has held true as higher education organizations across the globe have not only pushed forward in adverse circumstances but generated long-term changes in organizational culture that are likely to stick.

Karen Ferreira-Meyers: Resilience is another important 21st-century skill. It needs to be present at an individual level (all stakeholders involved), but also at an institutional and societal level. As the University of Eswatini operates in a third-world setting, it already had quite high resilience, even before the pandemic. But still, the pandemic caught us off-guard, took away part of our existing resilience and showed us that there is a need to keep on working on resilience, as a continuous effort.

Brewer et al.'s (2019) definition of resilience is useful as it was developed specifically for the higher education context: resilience is a "dynamic process of positive adaptation in the face of adversity or challenge. This process involves the capacity to negotiate for and draw upon psychological, social, cultural and environmental resources" (Brewer et al., 2019, p. 1114).

I have represented the way we can build resilience visually below. These points correspond to the different sources of resilience in a way.



When we analyse this list, we note that little was done. Even though on an individual basis, fear was acknowledged and peer support/mentoring provided, this was not necessarily so at an institutional level. Today, a few wellness resources are provided (for example, we are holding a wellness week as we speak – January 2022 – with information on mental and physical health). We have not been able to identify those who struggle the most and thus they have been left to deal with everything on their own.

Research has shown that resilient institutions have effective communication channels with a coherent crisis communication strategy. They have response plans for all kinds of teaching and learning disruptions. They have adequate digital infrastructure, and staff and students have – at least – basic digital literacy. Resilient institutions demonstrate a strong sense of staff and learner community, ensure academic professional development can take place, and support staff who seeks to undertake resilience-building strategies.

As an institution, we have done well, I feel, when it comes to digital infrastructure (even though more is needed) and digital literacy. However, because of the fact that we are in difficult economic situations in the university, ensuring continuous professional development is not easy.

All in all, we now better understand – two years into the pandemic and its multiple disruptions and challenges – what is needed. Whether we will, as an institution of higher learning, be able to provide all this is another story. But, if at least some individuals can demonstrate higher levels of resilience and become role models for others, we have done a good job.

Timo Halttunen: Thank you very much.

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