

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing Online Student Leadership Training Interventions so that Disadvantaged Black Students May Enjoy a Seat at the Proverbial Table

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Abstract

The advent of COVID-19 and the consequent imposition of a national lockdown from March 2020 in South Africa spurred South African universities to introduce new remote ways of delivering their curricula and offering extra-curricular activities. Some of these new modes of delivery tended to disadvantage already socio-economically disadvantaged black students whose lack of access to appropriate equipment, tools and data prevented them from properly accessing and fully utilising the new forms of e-learning on offer. In this context, this article considers the challenges faced by student affairs professionals at the University of Pretoria in offering new, inclusive forms of online leadership-development training to students in leadership positions at the institution. It analyses data collected from student leaders between 2016 and 2020 at the university which indicated that there had been a lack of leadership development among disadvantaged black students at high school level compared with that on offer to white students in high school. In this context, this article describes how student affairs professionals at the University of Pretoria sought to translate face-to-face leadership training into online initiatives that would ensure that already disadvantaged black students would not be disadvantaged further through differential access to leadership-development training, particularly given their greater need for such support due to their relative previous lack of exposure. This article further places black students' needs for equitable access to leadership training in the context of the individual and structural advantages that can accrue from such training, including in relation to career development and occupying leadership positions in the economy and society.

Keywords

student development, WhatsApp, student life, student leadership, student development, training, student leadership development, COVID-19

Introduction

As South Africa entered a government-mandated lockdown imposed in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, academic and professional staff members of residential universities were faced with a highly complex predicament: How to continue academic and extracurricular programmes while face-to-face contact was

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impossible? Under various levels of lockdown, the problem persisted for most of the 2020 academic year.

In response e-learning¹ as an emergency measure became a priority in tertiary education (Mpungose, 2020) and budgetary and development resources were deployed accordingly. At the same time, extracurricular programmes, such as student development, were placed on hold at many institutions, including at the University of Pretoria. At the universities where these programmes continued, they were deprioritised and resources were funnelled elsewhere towards the curriculum. Deprioritising critical extracurricular programmes became part of the devastating collateral damage caused by the pandemic.

As the academic year continued and the situation in countries such as South Africa showed little sign of significant improvement, student affairs professionals faced the challenge of re-establishing extracurricular activities and training in what had now become a predominantly online environment. As a student affairs professional who specialises in leadership development within the University of Pretoria, I have first-hand experience of the challenges that were faced at this time.

This article considers the vital role of universities in exposing students to leadership development, with particular reference to the exposure of black students to such development and their need for such training, as shown by the quantitative analysis of data gathered from student leaders at the University of Pretoria. The data, which were collected via a number of surveys of student leaders at the university with the purpose of improving the training on offer, were interpreted with reference to these students' previous experience of leadership development at school and their resulting needs in occupying leadership positions at the university. It was found that there had been no leadership training for many black students at school; while almost all the white students had been exposed to such training. In this context, this article considers how the university's Department of Student Affairs sought to provide inclusive virtual leadership-development support under COVID-19. In particular, the article focuses on the department's efforts to close the existing gap in leadership-development between the white and black students, instead of allowing it to deteriorate due to a lack of access to data and equipment among disadvantaged black students.

Student Leadership Development

The student development model adopted by the Department of Student Affairs (2016) at the University of Pretoria places emphasis on the development of students as the leaders of extracurricular activities and student life at the university. The institution is structured in such a way that the Student Representative Council (SRC) and its subordinate structures are mandated to (among other responsibilities) ensure a healthy and diverse student life. This mandate is implemented through an intricate leadership structure of executive committees operating in the various areas of student life.

1 E-learning refers to education that takes place over the internet. It has become an umbrella term for non-face-to-face learning platforms (Mpungose, 2020).

Comprising about 280 selected and elected student leaders every year, the student leadership cohort promotes stability on campus. Including by playing a crucial role in managing the implementation of extracurricular activities. In an effort to help these students perform their roles effectively, the Department of Student Affairs, mainly but not exclusively through its Student Development Unit, contributes leadership-development support. A crucial aspect of this work is to ensure that the support on offer addresses the variable exposure of students to leadership development before university. The students on the various student leadership committees form the basis of the sample for this study.

Table 1 below indicates the extent of leadership training received before entering university as reported by incoming black and white student leaders between 2016 and 2020. The information in this table was sourced from successive annual student leadership development initiation surveys undertaken by the Student Development Unit after the election of incoming student leaders every September from 2016 to 2020. This survey was designed to indicate, through self-identification, the leadership background of the new student leaders. The aim of this survey is to provide data so that student development initiatives and training are of relevance and meet identified needs. One of the questions student leaders were asked was: “Have you received leadership training or development in high school?” A follow-up question for students who replied “No”, was: “Did your high school provide leadership development and training?”

Table 1: Responses to student leadership development initiation survey conducted from 2016 to 2020 on high-school leadership-development experience, by race.

	Students who had received student leadership development in high school		Students who did not receive student leadership development in high school		Schools that provided student leadership development		Schools that did not provide student leadership development	
	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
Racial demographics								
2016	31%	98%	69%	2%	38%	100%	62%	0%
2017	34%	94%	66%	6%	41%	100%	59%	0%
2018	35%	97%	65%	3%	40%	99%	60%	1%
2019	30%	97%	70%	3%	43%	100%	57%	0%
2020	31%	98%	69%	2%	37%	99%	63%	1%

Table 1 indicates that black students were much less likely to have received leadership development training at their high schools than white students.

This article does not aim to research the background of leadership development in South African high schools and the reasons for the differential provision thereof. However, the results of the student leadership initiation surveys undertaken at the

University of Pretoria indicate that a lack of pre-university leadership development among black students might be an issue worth further study.

In the context of this proviso, Table 1 indicates that black students were much less likely to have received leadership development training at their high schools than white students, most of whom had participated in some form of leadership development at high school. The data in Table 1 further indicate that not only had most of the black students lacked exposure to leadership development, they had also been denied the opportunity of such exposure since their schools had offered no such programme.

Participating in leadership development at high school level can foster greater understanding among the students interested in assuming positions of leadership at university level of what such roles are likely to entail. In this regard, annual student leadership development conclusion surveys conducted as the student leaders came to the end of their terms in office from 2016 to 2020, asked: “At the beginning of your leadership term, did you have an accurate idea of what the term [in office] will entail?”

Table 2: Results from student leadership development conclusion surveys conducted from 2016 to 2020 on expectations of leadership, by race.

Racial demographics	Students who had an accurate idea of what their term in office would entail		Students who did not have an accurate idea of what their term in office would entail	
	Black	White	Black	White
2016	43%	74%	57%	26%
2017	40%	71%	60%	29%
2018	39%	77%	61%	23%
2019	39%	76%	61%	24%
2020	37%	77%	63%	23%

This survey, which was conducted among the same student leaders who had been surveyed at the beginning of the year, implies that far fewer black than white students knew what they were letting themselves in for when they became leaders, which would have had a significant effect on their understanding of the impact that student leadership would have on them, including on their academics.

The data from the various student leadership development surveys conducted from 2016 to 2020 indicate that black students at the University of Pretoria were more likely to lack exposure and opportunities for leadership development at high school than white students, which implies that the university provided the first opportunity for many black students to gain exposure to leadership development. Against this background, Gott et al. (2019) note that experience in leadership development during the course of one’s education can foster substantial future career-development opportunities. In this context, the university should focus on developing the leadership skills and understanding of disadvantaged students as part of its mission to make all students more

employable and more likely to lead the society and economy of the future (Department of Student Affairs, 2016).

Leadership Development and the COVID-19 Challenges

Under COVID-19, the challenge of ensuring equitable access to leadership skills and the need to support black student leaders in this respect was compounded by the shift to e-learning (Mpungose, 2020), which generally further disadvantaged students from already disadvantaged backgrounds.

Previously, leadership development efforts had either taken the form of face-to-face interventions or had been implemented using a hybrid approach offering learning content both face-to-face and online. Access to the training on offer had been partial prior to the pandemic outbreak. For example, student leaders whose transport options were limited could not take advantage of the leadership-development support that was on offer as effectively as the others. However, with the complete shift to online interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the split between privileged and underprivileged students became even clearer, with many disadvantaged black students unable to access the interventions provided, as was found by Mpungose (2020).

Much of the online content previously made available by the Student Development Unit at the University of Pretoria had been forged on the understanding that it would be fully accessible to students deploying the Wi-Fi and digital devices available on campus, the assumption being that students spend most of their time on campus and could therefore access these resources at will.

However, under lockdown and with the closure of residential campuses, such access was no longer possible. In addition, it soon became apparent that the online interventions that had previously been made available to support access to learning and extra-curricular activities were insufficient to meet the needs of the new situation. The main stumbling block for many students without access to internet via either Wi-Fi or LAN was inadequate access to sufficient data packages to use the online services. Although institutions provided data and zero-rated internet resources, such resources were quite limited. Given the need to prioritise data use, students tended to reserve data for online learning and other academic endeavours. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds also had lacked adequate access to smart devices, such as smartphones, laptops and tablets, preventing some of them from accessing any form of online learning. Although higher education institutions did their best to assist students, limited resources remained the reality. In this context, extracurricular activities were not prioritised by institutions and became inaccessible to disadvantaged students facing data and equipment shortfalls.

A number of further challenges in producing appropriate online versions of curricula and training were identified. In particular, syllabi that had been delivered face-to-face or in hybrid form were not that easily translated into content that could be distributed online. For example, many materials could not simply be translated into videos and slideshows in relation to the leadership development training offered by the University of Pretoria. In addition, it was difficult to assess how much time students had

at their disposal to engage in this training under the new online conditions for learning. In this regard, time and resource constraints among students led to the syllabus being redesigned, so that essential parts of the training were covered first. However, in seeking to redesign the leadership-development syllabus, the Student Development Unit also had to take account of the different kinds of training required by the student leaders at the various stages of their leadership.

Furthermore, given that much time had already been lost due to initial uncertainty around the pandemic and its likely impacts, there was a need to condense the information that was to be made available without rendering it inaccessible or less meaningful to students who had previously had little to no previous interaction with, or exposure to, student leadership development.

At the same time, many of those in student leadership positions who had been elected or selected in September, which is when the university's one-year term in office for such positions starts, had already undertaken the first part of their training in 2019, and were already halfway through their term in office when the South African lockdown was announced in March 2020. This bought the Student Development Unit some preparation time, since only the supplementary and additional parts of the training had to be redesigned and presented in the immediate future.

However, in the medium and longer term, it became apparent that the likelihood of contact sessions resuming by the time of the next round of leadership elections and selection in September 2020 was extremely low. This prompted a rush to redevelop and adjust the syllabus and interventions in such a way that incoming leaders would receive the necessary training. This was a challenge that created significant uncertainty as such had never before been attempted at the institution.

There also arose a moral question about equitable access to extracurricular student development under lockdown. Given the inability of some students to participate in, and make use of, student leadership development resources as a result of socio-economic constraints and limited access to the necessary resources, a new threat had emerged: that advantaged students would be further privileged by their ability to access online leadership interventions, placing already disadvantaged students at a further disadvantage as a result of their inability to strengthen their capacity through such training. In this context, it was asked: Should student development be continued with those who had access at the cost of those without access?

In response, it was decided by the Student Development Unit that students could not be left behind because of their socio-economic status and inability to access online training. So, the question then became: How to find a way to allow all students to enjoy the benefits of extracurricular student development? In this context, it became quite clear that the form of online engagement undertaken prior to lockdown was insufficient for the new situation and that the form and content of this engagement had to be rethought and redesigned to create accessible, efficient, inclusive platforms for student leadership development.

Redesigning Student Leadership Development to Meet COVID-19 Challenges

Identifying needs

The first challenge in redesigning student leadership development under COVID-19 entailed identifying the needs of the students who were no longer on campus, some of whom were also experiencing limited online access. In the past, student development surveys had offered quick and easy means of gauging information and making informed decisions. However, under the pandemic and conditions of limited online access for many students, it was realized that any information gathered online would be skewed towards those students who had access to data and devices. Therefore, the establishment of more widely accessible contact and communication lines became the priority.

Given that the cohort of students in leadership positions was relatively small (about 280), it was decided that each of these students could be contacted via telephone by staff members of the Student Development Unit in order to gather information on the best way forward for establishing a scalable, sustainable communication channel. From the telephone survey, it became clear that most students, black and white, had access to some form of smart device, predominantly smartphones, but very few black students (18%) and a significant proportion of white students had quite limited access to data. This meant that many of the students would not be able to access data-heavy training videos or spend significant time on online training platforms. However, from the telephonic survey, it also became clear that every student in the cohort had access to the WhatsApp communication platform.

Table 3: Student leader data and device requirements

	Students who required data		Students who required devices	
	Black	White	Black	White
Racial demographics				
2020	82%	17%	4	0%
2021	71%	22%	1%	0%

Choosing a communications platform

The WhatsApp platform thus became the clear front-runner for communication. With its relatively low data-consumption rate compared with, for example, web-based communication platforms, and with the added benefit of low device requirements, it became the platform of preference for student leaders in the cohort. Deploying the programme's functionality, it also became easy to group students together and tailor communications to meet individual needs. Furthermore, various communication providers had data plans that dedicated data specifically to the WhatsApp platform. It was therefore agreed that WhatsApp would be the predominant communications medium for the student leadership cohort.

With lines of communication established in the form of various small, specific WhatsApp groups, a quick, responsive process of establishing student leaders' needs regarding training, and communication and access requirements was put in place. This provided the data required by the Student Development Unit in its efforts to understand how the university's leadership-development initiatives should be redesigned to align with the students' identified needs and the communications platforms at their disposal.

Redesigning the form and content of the training

Listening to the expressed views of the student leaders, the Student Development Unit realized that long videos exceeding two minutes in length were inefficient, and that any intervention that required downloading or printing was out of alignment with the resources and equipment to which many of the students had access. In this context, significant parts of the content developed and adjusted over the years of the leadership development programme became obsolete, as the focus turned to producing a solution designed around the media and resources to which the students had access.

Accordingly, the first step was to redesign the curriculum to include short, high-impact interventions through which the Student Development Unit focused on engaging student leaders with questions that could be answered quickly and directly.

A rapid redesign of the syllabus content also had to take place. In this regard, the Student Development Unit moved away from long, text-heavy slideshows to making use of small, low-resolution infographics. A focus on systematic flow and core information replaced the deployment of heavily contextualized settings and image- and text-heavy content. The emphasis was on producing clear summaries of the key content and presenting these in a simple way that did not require the use of large amounts of data or complex software. An added benefit of the new form for the content was that it spoke to the image literacy of the student cohort. Once the information presented in support of student-leadership development had been condensed, it became that much easier and quicker to present, addressing the challenge of student time constraints which had previously been identified. At which point the main outstanding challenge remained that of the platform that should be chosen to communicate the syllabus.

A two-pronged approach

A two-pronged approach was adopted in relation to the question of which media to use. The first prong was to replace the video content that had previously been provided before the pandemic with discussions held on the various WhatsApp groups that had now been established among the student leadership cohort. Expert trainers were scheduled to present the content in summary form, deploying low-resolution images and short voice notes as required. In the smaller groups, student leaders could then engage and question the presenters, and a fast, responsive form of engagement was created. The learning environment that was created in this way proved to be a robust one which had the added advantage of linking student leaders together to further their learning process

through the deployment of various supplementary resources. Student leaders were able to lead the communication and interaction process, guiding the topics under discussion so that they addressed their actual training and capacity-building needs. The WhatsApp approach also fostered quite strong participation among the students, presumably because the discrete groups that were formed tended to protect participants from the greater exposure that they would have faced had they engaged in discussion on a larger public platform.

The second prong was the University of Pretoria's online blackboard learning programme, ClickUP – which, like WhatsApp, has a zero rating. This was deployed to provide supplementary resources. The students were already familiar with this easily accessible platform, which meant they could spend their time on understanding the content being presented, rather than on orientating themselves to the platform.

The deployment of WhatsApp and ClickUP allowed the discussions and content disseminated via these platforms to remain available for future reference. In addition, the emphasis on engagement produced by the deployment of these platforms encouraged continued learning among the student leaders. By enabling the establishment of smaller groups, the use of WhatsApp also facilitated a more focused form of engagement and an approach better suited to the specific student leadership structures to which the students belonged, allowing leadership development that had never been previously possible during face-to-face training. At the same time, a number of students were unable to access these platforms because they lacked either data or devices, which posed a challenge that had to be overcome by the Student Development Unit in its quest to ensure that no student would be disadvantaged in the new training environment.

Equitable access to devices and data

Although the cohort had access to WhatsApp, some students did not have a sustainable source of data or lacked appropriate devices. In the context of institutional budgetary constraints under which funding for academic programmes was prioritised, this posed a significant challenge. In part, this was addressed by a scheme under which the university loaned devices to students in need. In addition, the Student Development Unit sought to help students receive devices via donations.

Addressing the issue of access to data, the Student Development Unit found that only 5GB or less of data was required for the redesigned student-development training curriculum. The relatively low levels of data required meant that students who were identified as being in need could be assisted quite easily via various fundraising initiatives which led to the data being delivered directly to their devices.

Sustainability

The final challenge that needed to be addressed was the long-term scaling and sustainability of the newly developed training process. In this regard, the problem of access to devices seemed to have been addressed by the widespread provision of these to students in need

by higher education institutions keen to ensure continued learning via online media. This placed the Student Development Unit in the strong position of being able to leverage this provision to further students' extracurricular learning at the institution.

The long-term sustainability of providing sufficient data for the leadership-development training was less assured in the context of the fundamental uncertainty of funding provision. However, given the relatively small size of the student leadership cohort and the low data-consumption requirements of the new training programme, the risk of the necessary data costs not being covered from the internal budget and donations was considered minimal.

Monitoring and evaluation

Although measurement of the impacts of the new leadership-development programme was incomplete at the time of publication, preliminary monitoring indicated positive results. At the same time, it should be noted that the cohort surveyed soon after lockdown was implemented had previously received initial face-to-face training at the beginning of their terms in office in September 2019. Furthermore, the second cohort, that entered office from September 2020 and was trained exclusively online, was still in office at the time of the preparation of this study and the process of measuring the impacts of the new low-data, online leadership-development programme on them was still under way. Nevertheless, it would seem that the initiative has proven successful on a practical basis insofar as the student leaders have continued to function at the expected level, although exploration of the longer-term effects of the new training programme would require further research and data collection.

Providing Black Students a Seat at the Table

In the aftermath of the Fallist student protest movements which erupted across South Africa from 2015 (Lester et al., 2017), the challenge of access to universities, particularly for black, disadvantaged students has been a recurrent theme in the discourse and remains a key issue of contention (Nkanjeni, 2021), as was made clear when national protests against tuition and accommodation fees and financial and academic exclusions at South African universities broke out once again early in 2021. In this context, the lockdowns imposed in response to COVID-19 from March 2020 highlighted and exacerbated inequity in the provision of higher-education services to students – inequity that has been shaped by a legacy of oppression on the basis of race which has continued to deny poor, black students the same opportunities as white students.

So, for example, Table 1 above shows that almost all of the surveyed student leaders who had not previously participated in a leadership-development programme at school were black, reflecting the disadvantaged background of many black South Africans (Cejas, 2007). In this context, institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to provide disadvantaged students with platforms and access to training and experience that can help to negate the legacy of inequity (Nathane & Harms Smith, 2019). This responsibility

extends beyond simply providing black students with access to academic qualifications. It should also entail offering them extracurricular development and, in particular, leadership training which can not only enhance their employability (Speckman, 2015), but also equip them with leadership skills and experience to which they previously had no access in high school (Gardner-Lubbe et al., 2016).

Before the pandemic and the resulting lockdowns in South Africa, students were able to access equipment and the internet on campus. However, under lockdown, students no longer had access to these resources, placing a responsibility on institutions of higher learning to redesign and foster student leadership-development and other extracurricular activities in such a way that all students could access them.

The provision of equitable access to leadership development programmes should be considered as crucial given the impacts of such programmes in equipping student leaders with the confidence, the eloquence and the voice to represent the interests of their student peers and to claim and insist on opportunities that foster their own economic and social betterment. Such betterment may take the form of enhanced career opportunities for the particular student leader, including in the shape of a relatively high income and senior managerial position. In addition, promotion into managerial positions would enable these individuals to make decisions and implement changes at a high level, potentially shaping the future of South African society and the country's economy. Thus, leadership-development training can offer students, in particular disadvantaged, black students, a seat at the table.

In this context, the student development model adopted at the University of Pretoria (Department of Student Affairs, 2016) includes a mandate to help students to develop themselves as potential future managers and leaders in an equitable way. Such efforts entail ensuring that the provision of leadership-development opportunities must not be to the detriment of a particular group, which is an issue that requires constant attention. In this regard, responsible, equitable innovation in the area of student development, including in relation to the deployment of institutional resources and the creative use of accessible platforms, should be promoted.

In this context, the case study described in this article may serve as an example of how a student leadership-development programme may be adapted creatively and in an innovative fashion to ensure equitable provision under difficult circumstances. It further indicates the importance of producing individual, tailored approaches in response to student needs and specific resource constraints. Student development professionals should not be afraid to redesign and adapt approaches away from the norm to ensure that individual needs are met and to ensure that all students enjoy a seat at the table regardless of their socio-economic background. This case study also indicates the importance of adopting new media and different approaches to addressing student needs. In particular, it illustrates how, in an age of fast-paced, interactive communications, the students themselves may be best placed to advise on how their needs may be most effectively met, as long as student affairs and development professionals are prepared to listen to and learn from them.

Conclusion

The participation of black student leaders at the University of Pretoria in school leadership-development programmes was found to be much more limited than that of white student leaders, placing black students at a significant disadvantage in terms of leadership skills and experience. In addition, black students had less access to communications devices and, in particular, internet in their home spaces. It is therefore essential, in an effort to ensure equity, that institutions of higher learning employ creative methods to overcome the legacies of inequitable access to opportunity, as well as current impediments to access, which may be faced by black students in relation to leadership development training (as well as other extracurricular activities). This became quite evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdown restrictions on movement highlighted and exacerbated the challenge of inequitable access, leading student affairs professionals at the University of Pretoria to address this problem in new ways. In this regard, institutions of higher learning had, and continue to have, a particular responsibility to foster the leadership abilities of black students so that they can enjoy a seat at the table of socio-economic power and influence on an equitable basis.

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