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## Review Article

# A “Rearview Mirror” Look at COVID-19: Successes and Further Lessons at Botswana Open University

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## Abstract

In retrospect, as if looking into a rearview mirror, the COVID-19 pandemic came with a lot of challenges to business processes, where workplaces had to reinvent themselves to remain afloat. This has been particularly the case with universities, where embracing online teaching and learning was precipitated, usually without enough know-how in ODL. The Botswana Open University took steps to reposition itself to ensure a smooth running of all its processes, thus managing the COVID-19 risks and challenges adequately. This has come as an opportunity for BOU, which operates through the ODL methodology. However, the institution had to take conscious steps to circumvent the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The management proactively put in place a versatile task team that led the response and adaptation of the university to COVID-19. Indeed, BOU's level of success during these uncertain times has been admirable, given that the advent of the pandemic coincided with BOU's strength as an ODL tertiary institution. Numerous other lessons have also been learned, calling for, among other necessities, moving together with supervisees, looking into the future, and being prepared for emergencies.

Thus, looking back at the time concerning the pandemic, the experience emanating from it points to many successes and many lessons to be learned and these have been expanded in this work.

## Background

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) by the WHO in late January 2020. In the first half of 2024, almost 800 million confirmed cases and more than 7 million deaths have also been reported globally [1]. For those who have generally recovered from infection with the COVID-19 causative agent called SARS-CoV-2, many still have lingering symptoms [2,3], thus suffering from the condition called long COVID [1]. Also, although the estimates of the prevalence of long COVID

vary widely [4], the WHO estimates the percentage of people who continue to have or develop at least one symptom more than three months after the SARS-CoV-2 infection, i.e., those with long COVID, as 10–20%, representing quite a sizeable proportion. Klein [5], also reports that up to 30% of the general population has experienced some form of virus-induced cognitive impairment, including trouble concentrating, brain fog, or memory loss. Such would extend to a lack of productivity at the workplace.

Looking back as if in a rearview mirror, COVID-19 was a



ferocious respiratory condition that also disrupted business processes, posing mammoth challenges to all businesses [6]. The education sector was not spared [7-9] and an urgent re-engineering of the educational landscape was a major challenge, especially with the Universities and other tertiary institutions, that had to continue tuition and other educational processes as the pandemic took hold.

COVID-19 was an arduous and debilitating condition that has not received sufficient review to draw important lessons to prepare the globe for future pandemics. There is just about paucity of work in this regard. For example, Aiyuk, et al. [10] discussed some adjustments made by the Botswana Open University when the pandemic began and failed to draw sufficient lessons that would help in empowering institutions and communities to withstand future pandemics. This work addresses that salient gap.

### The Botswana Open University

The Botswana Open University (BOU) is one of the four public state-owned universities in Botswana and the only dedicated Online and Distance Learning (ODL) institution. BOU was founded by an Act of Parliament in 2017 and has been focusing on giving tuition remotely while leaving no one behind. Indeed, this inclusivity drive is well enshrined in the BOU Strategic Plan 2023-2028 that is in force.

The Botswana Open University, given its methodology of remote learning, has a structure that is scattered all over Botswana, to make support services to learners to be as near as possible. There are five Regional Campuses, with one in Gaborone (the capital city) in the South, one in Palapye in the Central Region, one in Francistown in the North, one in Maun in the North West, and one in Kang in the West. The university is headquartered in Gaborone, where the main administrative facilities are located.

The student body of BOU is made up of about five thousand students who are scattered all over Botswana and receive tuition mainly virtually. There are thirty-three full-time academic staff and around eight hundred part-time academic staff. The part-time staff outnumber the full-time staff because of the mode of operation of the university, as the ODL approach uses a lean full-time academic staff strength. The university also has a strong support structure that comprises about two hundred and twenty non-academic or support staff.

BOU was also adversely affected by COVID-19 and a quick adaptation for resilience came alive, making admirable response moves to stay afloat. The challenges that were faced by the university were multi-faceted and included the stoppage of face-to-face teaching sessions that normally took place intermittently. Also, sessional examinations that were previously all venue-based, requiring students to assemble and write in physically designated centers, had to be stopped. Apart from teaching and assessment processes, other university processes, such as meetings, had to all go virtual, and staff travels were put on hold. Therefore, rigorous steps had to be taken to ensure that the BOU campuses remained free of the coronavirus, for work to continue unperturbed. Tladi and

Aiyuk [11] have expounded well on the limitations that had to be surmounted in the face of the pandemic.

### The BOU COVID-19 response strategy

**The setting:** The Management of the Botswana Open University (BOU), with its visionary leadership in line with its Strategic Plan (2019-2023) and Risk Management, together with directives from the Government of Botswana, established a six-man COVID-19 Task Team in early March 2020, long before a country lockdown was necessary. Following, to take the necessary steps that were necessary to help BOU fight the pandemic, a coordinated strategy was developed by the Task Team that was appointed in March 2020 by the Executive Management Team (EMT) of the university [12]. The Task Team was to inform and educate the BOU staff and student communities on the COVID-19 condition and disseminate credible information to staff and students as and when necessary. It had a dedicated budget and was the advisory body to the EMT on COVID-19. It is noteworthy that each regional campus of the university had a task team that was established by and answerable to the main 6-man task team that was put in place by the executive management.

The salient steps that were taken by the task team to fight the pandemic are highlighted below [12].

**Risk assessment:** Following the Strategy developed by a task team that was established with a dedicated budget line, high-risk (high priority) areas in all the BOU regional campuses and headquarters were identified, together with the requisite actions to be taken, to ensure prevention and containment of the spread of SARS-CoV-2.

Some of the main high-risk areas and corresponding actions taken for BOU were as indicated below (Table 1).

**Table 1:** High-risk areas identified for the fight against SARS-CoV-2.

Risk areas/persons	Actions Taken
Restrooms and Bathrooms	To be cleaned more often and updated Rosters displayed
Receptions (Headquarters and Regional campuses)	Regular sanitizing to be done; Distancing; Booth modifications
Entrance spaces	Posters and notices to be displayed, sanitizing to be done
Tutorials, inductions, examination sessions	To be suspended and be resumed later
Shared offices	Sanitizers are to be provided and working from home is recommended. Working from home policy later developed
Receivers of Assignments	Assignment submissions to go online
Cafeteria	To Brief staff; fumigation to be done; to advise to close for the time being
Surfaces around campuses	To be sprayed and fumigated
BOU application/registration points	Processes to be reconfigured with hand washing, sanitizing, social distancing
Messengers handling mail	To use sanitizers and masks
Official Vehicles	To be sanitized and with very reduced use (internal travels almost brought to a halt)
Library	Sanitizers to be used; To recommend closure during the peak of the pandemic
Loading bays and surroundings	Regular sanitizer use by workers; To spray regularly

\*Adapted from Aiyuk, et al. [10].

## Response to various situations

There was a need for the university to have response criteria for varying situations. The response initiatives that were used are stipulated below.

- Implore staff members to get vaccinated.
- Sharing regular information on Coronavirus with staff and students.
- Display posters and notices about the virus around campuses.
- Engage all service providers on campuses for information and to agree on action to be undertaken.
- Procure sanitizers and any disinfectants to be distributed to staff.
- All risky surfaces are likely to be handled by people to be regularly sanitized.
- Employees from risky situations are to be allowed to self-quarantine for the stipulated duration.
- Any employee suspected to have come into contact with infected persons is to be released for self-quarantine for the required number of days.
- Any suspected or real case is to be reported to the Department of Human Resources for onward reporting to the Ministry of Health using the Toll-Free Number, 997:
- Retrofit high-risk areas to be fit for purpose.
- Partner with other major stakeholders like the Ministry of Health, the Wealth Health Organisation, and the Commonwealth of Learning.
- The task team continually advised university management and informed other key players on actions to be taken.

In line with the high-risk areas and response to various situations, the following immediate actions were proposed and accepted by management.

- National Protocols operationalized to the letter: Mask wearing, Hand washing/sanitizing, social distancing, adequate ventilation, avoiding crowds, limiting travels, both short and long distances.
- Screening at the gate with an isolation place for suspected cases and communication with the Government is done.
- Intermittent spatial disinfection with fumigation, when cases are confirmed or suspected.
- Supply of high-quality branded masks to all staff and sanitizer in all offices and shared spaces. With the approach of winter, buffs are also acquired and distributed.

- Floor stickers, glass shields, etc
- Holding meetings with cleaning service providers to ensure continuous cleaning and disinfection of office door handles, tables, and other surfaces.
- Periodical visits to all Regional campuses for site inspection and addressing challenges.
- Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation
- Continuous communication: Fortnightly report written and presented to management and intermittent communication of salient issues with all staff members. Using information from credible sources, Posters, Videos, etc. Communications from all regional Directors, through their respective task teams, on the state of affairs in their Regions.
- Suspension of tutorials
- Suspension of all activities involving a large number of people as per Government directives.
- Provision of the necessary support to staff as per the existing needs.
- Allowing staff to work from home to decongest campuses and reduce mobility.
- Suspension of external and non-essential in-country staff travel.
- The university is to enforce the utilization of online services, including for all examinations.
- Enforcing adherence to social distancing for all customers that come into the Botswana Open University (BOU) premises.
- Improving ventilation in areas that were poorly ventilated.
- Promoting the washing of hands by posting notices, sharing videos, and providing the necessary resources.
- Observing the recommendations from the Ministry of Health and WHO.
- Increasing internet bandwidth to support online services.

Together with the above, the following precautions were recommended and adhered to:

- Employees who have sick family members at home to inform their supervisors and observe the recommended precautions.
- Employees showing symptoms of the disease to be immediately separated from other employees and the relevant authorities be notified.
- To provide support to employees who were at higher risk of contracting COVID-19.

The outlined strategy remained in force for the duration of the pandemic, until late 2022 when the task team was disbanded, and underwent review as necessary. From this strategy, a compendium of COVID-19 Guidelines [10] was developed, and this was the tool used to further direct all of BOU's response to the pandemic.

At the point when the strength of the pandemic had waned substantially, somewhere in late 2022, an exit strategy was developed by the task team and was signed by the task team chairperson and co-signed by the Vice Chancellor. This was then communicated to all staff and students. The main dictates in the communication were that temperature checks at points of entry, together with social distancing, would no longer be required and masks would only be worn in indoor settings. There was also the requirement that very regular hand washing and sanitizing would continue until a later date and, though staff members were advised to continue these practices further, they were no more mandatory as of mid-2023. So, in essence, the Public Health and Social Measures (PHSM) were brought to a halt. Isolation of suspected cases was also stopped, although people were advised to consult with flu-like symptoms. The use of ample natural ventilation of own spaces was also required.

At this point, the task team was banded and was replaced by a Psychosocial team for counseling and other support, whose work continues to this day.

### Further lessons are drawn from the pandemic

Some lessons learned from the COVID-19 challenges and actions taken have been previously discussed by Aiyuk, et al. [12]. However, this work tackles the subject more exhaustively and points to additional important lessons, especially in connection with leadership. There is a need also for a preventative disposition towards pandemics and other emergencies.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a lot of personal and societal ills. It separated people from their workplaces and familiar daily routines, as well as their families and other loved ones. In many cases, it added stress and anxiety, leading to a drop in morale and fragmented team cohesion, all of which resulted in dampened work performance. For people who have recovered from COVID-19, many have been left with post-COVID syndrome or long COVID-19. It was therefore critical for leadership in various spheres of work and operations to actively foster a sense of care and inclusion, as workers continued facing daunting challenges, both personal and shared, at different levels.

From the academic side, one of the most apparent lessons is that for the academic enterprise of the future, Online and Distance Learning (ODL) will remain the leader in teaching and learning. A pure online or blended mode of delivery will most likely outweigh conventional face-to-face learning or the conventional approach, going forward. Again, because almost all institutions are struggling to embrace online learning, the pedagogical elements of ODL, such as interactivity and learner support, have not necessarily been well-addressed, bringing an issue of quality to light. To go online and offer quality

education, such aspects must be addressed. Nevertheless, remote work with clearly identified targets can be as effective as when employees stay in the office. This reduces the probability of spreading causative agents of communicable diseases like COVID-19, influenza, and the flu, which have become very commonplace at the end of the pandemic.

In addition, we have all learned that online methods of learning can reduce costs during these times of ever-dwindling resources. One example of this cost-savings is BOU's recent online graduation, which resulted in a hefty reduction of the usual associated costs. Another opportunity here is that ODL opens up education for the masses, which results in their empowerment.

From another end, COVID-19 has sadly again pointed out serious issues of equity, in especially developing countries, as many people are struggling to gain access to the basic tools needed to participate in ODL. Many don't have, for example, a reliable internet connection and a digital device like a laptop [11]. This issue is further exacerbated by Botswana's uneven population distribution in which much of the population resides in rural and remote areas. However, the ongoing Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) program shall go a long way to empowering citizens and others in Botswana.

### The needed leadership for COVID-19 and future pandemics

Many studies on COVID-19 have identified several behaviors that leaders could adopt to support their employees as everyone grapples with ongoing disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic [13]. Although the pandemic plunged people into unforeseen challenges, it has also allowed leaders to reflect on how to actively demonstrate inclusive and supportive behavior for their teams during anxious times like when other pandemics strike. So, as a leader of a team, each supervisor has an important role to play to ensure the well-being of team members during these unprecedented times. This has never been more important and has never been as challenging. Studies have also identified some definitive patterns in leadership that gave employees a sense of stability, empowerment, and inclusion, despite the crisis, and these are rich lessons worth internalizing. It is thus particularly important to ensure that there is a culture of support [14] and this brings into play compassion, empathy, and other important attributes for effective leadership.

### Compassionate leadership

Compassion and care must be a certainty for employees at a time of great uncertainty [15], such as during these COVID-19 times [16]. It is important to show compassion towards colleagues, as they try to manage an increasing burden of responsibility. Compassionate leadership involves responding to colleagues with kindness and acknowledging their concerns or worries.

Even the smallest acts of compassion can have a positive impact. Not only does compassion benefit the recipient, but also benefits witnesses and this knock-on effect has positive outcomes on the organizational culture, helping to create a caring and supportive environment.





West [17] discusses four components of compassionate leadership:

- Attending: “I pay attention to others and how they are feeling”
- Understanding: “I understand why an individual is feeling distressed”
- Empathizing: “I share the feelings of others who are in distress”
- Helping: “I take thoughtful, intelligent, and appropriate action to help relieve an individual’s suffering”

As a part of the COVID-19 response, work variables will vary widely with different people, so there is no way to prescribe specific actions that will fit everyone. Given the many variables that occur at work about a pandemic response, as a manager or leader, if one can build a relationship of trust with teams and individuals who are experiencing intense stress and other situations, one can support and help employees recover more quickly.

A glaring case was when, during the recent interactions of the COVID-19 Task Team with BOU headquarters personnel, a staff member asked how she could be helped with taking care of her child who was a COVID-19 case. So, leaders showing flexibility, and support through open conversations and time off policies can make a big difference. Even, McKinsey & Company [18] cite awareness, vulnerability, empathy, and compassion as four qualities that are critical for business leaders to care for people in crisis and set the stage for business growth and recovery. Soft leadership skills can hardly be ignored during this time [19]. Empathy is the ability to understand and share someone else’s feelings. Although one may not be experiencing the same challenges as, e.g., an entry-level employee, you can be mindful of what that team member is feeling. Where can you align with people in different circumstances from yours about shared concerns? What priorities do you have in common about your families, work, and community?

Once a leader has begun practicing empathy as it relates to leadership, he or she can start to lead with compassion. Indeed, compassionate leadership goes beyond empathy to take an active role in the solution. It requires recognizing the problem, understanding what others are experiencing, and then helping to be part of the change. Leading with compassion allows you to use your position and resources to help others and alleviate any pain. Compassion is active empathy. Some actions may involve issues like extended paid leave, additional sick days, expanded healthcare coverage (e.g., helping with COVID-19 or other testing), flexible schedules to accommodate the needs of the individual and family, and controlled remote working as was practiced at BOU. Adding compassion to the leadership and management skill set would have made all the difference in BOU’s thriving during the pandemic. An organization may be experiencing a crisis, but employees have an opportunity to improve how they treat each other and together build or co-create a better future. These are all major lessons that have emanated from the COVID-19 experience.

## The septuplet requisite soft skills- 7Cs

Quelch [20] brings an interesting cocktail of the seven Cs to help effective COVID-19 leaders, citing calmness, confidence, effective continuous communication, collaboration, community, compassion, and cash. Compassion here is extremely important, as many people in BOU depended upon their leaders who were not necessarily that resilient. They might have needed time to look after themselves or their families, e.g., an elderly parent or their fragile health state. They should be given space for this and thus given compassion as a very important manifestation of leadership.

In line with compassionate leadership also, supervisors had to be diligent about supporting supervisees’ safety, e.g., by arranging work to maximize the physical distance between people (decongestion through rotation, shifts, and working from home) and implementing all public health and protocols as given by the Government of Botswana and BOU Management through the COVID-19 Task Team.

## Emergency preparedness and future perspectives

The world was caught off-guard by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in millions of lives lost and significant economic and social disruptions. Lessons learned from this crisis must be used to prepare for other pandemics that may arise. As indicated already, remote work with clearly identified targets should be practiced, as this, when adequately controlled, is equally as effective as in-office work. This reduces the chances of spreading causative agents of communicable diseases like COVID-19 and the flu, which are now very common as the pandemic transitions to becoming endemic.

Organizations must be ready to respond quickly to any emergency like a pandemic, which involves the fast development and production of safe and effective environments of work. This however requires the necessary infrastructure, expertise, and resources, especially as these challenges are usually unpredictable. Preparing for and controlling emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic will also improve social cohesion and help reduce domestic violence that increased around the world. The welfare of households is thus important, as this can have a direct effect in the workplace, as even children become victims, as, schools, in addition, also remain closed.

## Conclusion and future direction

In all, the Botswana Open University recorded numerous successes concerning COVID-19. There was a well-marshaled strategy that was admirably implemented. However, as would be expected, challenges arose and these were generally well circumvented. In most cases, these left some lessons that were learned and well used, arming thus the university for any future pandemic.

The pandemic separated people from their workplaces, co-workers, and familiar daily routines. In many cases, it augmented stress, which led to a drop in morale, and fragmented team cohesion, all of which resulted in a reduced work performance. That’s why actively fostering a sense of inclusion

at work is so critical presently. Supervisors and other leaders have an opportunity to reflect on how to actively demonstrate inclusive and supportive behavior for teams and companies, bringing compassionate leadership to light. Ultimately, a compassionate approach to supporting workers is vital for workers to remain brave in the face of the challenges they face. Individualized support for staff members and continuous appreciation of outputs is important. Indeed, succeeding with showing empathy and compassion, supervisors can encourage staff members to stay strong, thus helping in the move towards a productive work environment.

Scanning the workplace for risks and proactively acting upon them can go a long way to keep organizations proactively prepared for any future health emergencies that may show up. Indeed, looking back, the infrastructure at BOU's campuses and headquarters was not optimal, and requisite adjustments were made. Presently, the university is better prepared for such challenges as was presented by COVID-19 and, therefore, there are a lot of success stories to tell as found in this work, and also many lessons to draw.

This work would be substantially enhanced by expanding on the aspects of emergency preparedness for future pandemics, together with a disaster management strategy. Such is thus recommended.

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