

Every challenge presents parallel opportunities

 By [Shan Raddiffe](#)

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As part of our #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.



Professor Mandla Makhanya, Vice Chancellor of Unisa

We chatted to Professor Mandla Makhanya, Vice Chancellor of Unisa, to get his take.

■ ***What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different to what you expected?***

Professor Mandla Makhanya: In the initial stages of the rise of the pandemic, as a university we responded as adequately as possible by, amongst others; running a comprehensive campaign targeted at staff and students, communicating messages about the need to observe the necessary hygienic protocols such as regular washing of hands, sanitisation and keeping the requisite social distance. We provided sanitisers in as many of our public areas on our premises as possible. We also directed the limitation of numbers allowed in spaces such as our libraries; whilst in some cases we closed down our study halls.

After the imposition of both the first regulations following the presidential declaration of the state of disaster and the subsequent complete lockdown, the university cancelled all events, including graduations, closed all campuses and directed staff to work from home, with the exception of essential service staff, and then we ordered a deep-cleaning of all campuses.

The university management then took a decision that the May/June 2020 examinations will occur on a non-venue basis. Like all South Africans, we were hopeful that this necessary step, led so ably by our government, would help to quickly flatten the curve and enable the country to resume normal life activity soonest. However, dealing with the virus has proven to be a more complex challenge than initially thought, not just for South Africa, but across the entire globe.

■ ***Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on your institution or economy...***

Makhanya: At institutional level, the university had been compelled to join the rest of the country in observing the lockdown regulations instituted by government and has had to close shop as directed by the State. This means that the bulk of our staff, with the exception of essential workers such as security officials and a central core from areas, such as ICT, had to work from home where possible.

Other staff members who are key to the operations of the university (e.g. in registration and study material production) could not come to work as they were not classified as essential workers in terms of the regulations. Apart from having to adapt to a new way of doing our work, such as holding meetings and other events online through Skype, Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and providing student support strictly online, it also meant that the university had to make emergency interventions by procuring the necessary ICT gadgets to enable staff to continue doing their work from home.

As far as students are concerned, all campus-based activities were cancelled, all graduation ceremonies planned for the period May-June 2020 were cancelled and the degrees conferred in absentia; while a decision was also taken to conduct only non-venue-based exams for the first semester examination period in May/June 2020.

At a national economic level, it is now an open secret that many of our businesses, if not all, were impacted adversely by the full lockdown implemented by the State, whilst many others are still not able to trade even under the current Level 4 risk-adjusted regulations. The pandemic has generally compelled all nations across the world to implement the necessary mitigation steps that effectively meant a sacrifice of their economies in a bid to save lives. In all countries, both domestic and international trade have taken a huge knock, and this has dire implications for job security, worker salaries, company revenues and, by extension, the livelihoods of families and individuals.

■ ***What measures have you had to implement to continue operating?***

Makhanya: Our staff have had to adapt to a new way of working from home and online. But I must emphasise that our service to our clients, the students, has always been offered online. Some of our students came to our campuses across the country as well as in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, merely to use the facilities that we have made available to those students who did not have access to gadgets and bandwidth, but the business of the university has always been online, except a few instances like assignments submitted in hard copy and exams written physically at our examination venues. It has now become obvious that implementation of a fully-fledged online environment has become necessary.

■ ***How has the lockdown affected your staff? What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health & safety, etc.?***

Makhanya: During the lockdown, the majority of our staff have had to adapt to the concept of working from home, with no direct physical supervision, including conducting meetings online through Skype, Microsoft Teams or Zoom. This is something many people are not accustomed to and would naturally bring with it a degree of uncertainty, apprehension and stress. Over and above providing the necessary ICT gadgets to those who did not have these devices, the university has also ensured that managerial and supervisory staff provide the necessary oversight, guidance and support to their teams as intimately as possible during this period. Whilst the normal HR policies generally remain in force, their application during this period require that we treat our people with empathy and understanding. It is a period that requires servant leadership, complemented by a spirit of ubuntu/botho and our institutional values of empathy and collegiality.

■ ***Comment on the challenges and opportunities?***

Makhanya: The Covid-19 pandemic has presented many challenges to organisations across the world, including with

regard to the management and supervision of teams remotely, the state of readiness of our economy, our institutions (and individuals generally) to the online working environment and the psychological readiness and disposition to deal with abrupt change such as the one imposed unexpectedly by the virus. However, the same challenge has presented humanity with a lot of opportunities to re-think and re-engineer a new way of doing business, especially at a time when the fourth industrial revolution has become a reality of our times. In the higher education milieu, the opportunity to fully embrace the 4IR and move with speed with the full implementation of online teaching and learning, particularly for distance education, has never been greater. With some of the interventions we have introduced in order to mitigate against the virus, the possibilities have become even more pronounced.

▣ ***What financial assistance is on offer to students?***

Makhanya: In recognition of the difficult socio-economic conditions faced by many of our students, particularly those from low-income households, we recently took a progressive decision to assist all students with data for purposes of ensuring that they can all complete the May/June 2020 examinations online. We are going to seek our Council's approval to spend millions of rands to pay for data.

▣ ***Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of the industry in any way?***

Makhanya: Absolutely. I am a great believer in the notion that every challenge also presents parallel opportunities. The Covid-19 challenge in particular presents the pleasant headache for the education sector in general to expedite its leap into the 4IR. Post the pandemic, we will be failing in our duty as leaders in this sector if we do not urgently, and collectively, produce a blueprint to catapult the sector into the advanced online teaching and learning environment that we have been envisaging for some time now. Not only do we have to produce such a blueprint, but we must also have the courage to implement it religiously.

▣ ***Give us your predictions for the next 6 months...***

Makhanya: Dealing with the virus has proven to be more difficult and complex than initially thought. All predictions, nationally and internationally, are that the virus will be with us for a long haul, possibly for another year or so. Therefore, we must expect restrictions on movement, while the re-opening of sectors of society (including the economy and schooling) will be a highly regulated affair, depending on how quickly the curve is flattened and infections and deaths are reduced. We will have to be pragmatic in our approaches to business, education and social life and adjust our plans depending on whatever level of lockdown we will be at a particular stage. We are in uncharted terrain here and we are dealing with a virus which is both new and unpredictable in character.

▣ ***What has been your biggest lesson from all this?***

Makhanya: There has never been a greater need and opportunity than this moment for the education sector to work much closer to produce a collective strategy and plan that will redefine the future outlook of the broader education sector – a plan that must proactively tackle possible challenges and risks such as the one presented by Covid-19, but also guide the country in how it can harness the opportunities presented by technological advancement and apply these in the education milieu.

ABOUT SHAN RADCLIFFE

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