

***Ironic lessons and contradictions in the lingering aftermath and impact of COVID 19 on Continuing Professional Development: reflective insights from Botswana***

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***Sub-theme: Sustaining Communities of Learning and practice in innovative open education focus on resilience and working, sharing and learning together in local communities and as a Pan-Commonwealth community.***

*Bantu Lulu K Morolong, PhD  
Botswana Open University (BOU)  
e-mail: [bmorolong@staff.bou.ac.bw](mailto:bmorolong@staff.bou.ac.bw)*

*Veronica Goitsewang Magang, PhD  
University of Botswana  
e-mail : [magangv@ub.ac.bw](mailto:magangv@ub.ac.bw)*

*Tebogo Moagi, PhD  
Botswana Open University (BOU)  
e-mail: [tmoagi@staff.bou.ac.bw](mailto:tmoagi@staff.bou.ac.bw)*

COVID-19 affected the education sector to unprecedented proportions with impacts that continue in its aftermath. One of the significant impacts of the pandemic was the pressure exerted on higher education institutions to rethink their delivery processes. The shift included an introduction of Technology mediated delivery of programmes including professional development programmes. Using data from two (2) purposively sampled universities, University of Botswana (UB) and Botswana Open University (BOU) this paper presents reflections and insights about this transition. These are used to demonstrate the stifling effects of the Pandemic on University based continuing Professional development as their lifelong Learning efforts. This noted, a critical reflection is presented on the tendency to overlook how the pandemic can ironically be perceived as having been a positive push factor for innovative change. The paper frames discussions on the fundamental tenets of theories of social change. and teases out pertinent issues on how COVID 19 propelled positive change in these contexts. This irony is presented as a rich platform for research about the pandemic which resembled a revolution in education. The survival strategies in the phase of COVID 19 are upheld. While experiences from the pandemic convincingly present it as an emergency, its impacts are noted to having fostered application of the principles of change. Lessons from these responses are presented as holding promise for sustainability of university professional development programmes, and to inform further research on change in these contexts so as to achieve better preparation for any change of the magnitude that came with COVID 19

*Key words: COVID 19, push factor, lifelong learning, social change, Continuing Professional development*



## **Introduction**

COVID-19 affected the education sector to unprecedented proportions with impacts that continue in its aftermath. One of the significant impacts of the pandemic was the pressure exerted on higher education institutions to rethink their delivery processes. The shift included an introduction of Technology mediated delivery of programmes including professional development programmes. Using data from two (2) purposively sampled universities being the University of Botswana (UB) and Botswana Open University (BOU). These two Universities have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which facilitates their close association in Teaching, Research and service. This paper presents reflections and insights about the COVID 19 experience of these two universities in their delivery of Continuing Professional Development Programmes during the COVID 19 era. This era is presented as a period of transition from delivery of CPD mainly through traditional face to face methodologies in these contexts, to technology mediated online delivery methodologies. This noted, a critical reflection is presented on the tendency to overlook how the pandemic can ironically be perceived as having been a positive push factor for innovative change.

This paper frames discussions of this transition on the fundamental tenets of theories of social change and teases out pertinent issues on how COVID 19 ironically, propelled positive change in these contexts. This irony is presented as a rich platform for research on change in the three areas of university work being, Promoting Teaching and Learning, Research, and Service. The survival strategies in the phase of COVID 19 are upheld. Experiences from the pandemic convincingly present it as an emergency with some characteristics of a revolution. However, in this paper its impacts are noted for having fostered practical application of some of the principles of change especially unplanned change. Lessons from these responses are deemed to hold promise for further innovation, resilience, and sustainability of university professional development programmes beyond COVID19. These lessons are also expected to inform further research on change in these contexts so as to achieve better preparation for any change of the magnitude that came with COVID 19 and its effects on Continuing Professional Development

The global outbreak of Coronavirus disease (COVID 19), which is an infectious disease caused by acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) and its subsequent variants, made countries around the world aware of their vulnerability of their socio economic sectors and in particular for education. The pandemic or disaster caused unprecedented disruptions on institutions of learning at all levels of education systems (Asif et al., 2022; Ihm, Zhang, Van Vijfeijken, & Waugh, 2021; Tarkar, 2020) affecting more than a 1.6 billion learners worldwide (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Aside from its notable impact on the health sector worldwide resulting in mandated total lockdown of economies by governments as an attempt to curb the spread of the virus (Tarkar, 2020), the pandemic brought about widespread change and put to a test to human beings in all aspects of the lives of societies.

As a disruptor to the 'normal' (United Nations, 2020) the pandemic resulted in a chain of events that governments had to contend with. For example, there was government lockdown that slowed down the global economy activities and most sectors temporarily closed to slow the spread of the pandemic (Naseer et al., 2023). Working from home became the norm and issues of psychological and mental health and loss of jobs were reported, travel restrictions were imposed, COVID 19 protocols were put in place, and schools at all levels closed (Jayanthi Rajendran & Kabriel, 2023; Naseer et al., 2023). The focus of this paper is the Impact of COVID 19 on a very important sector of Higher Education, which is Continuing Professional Development as it is carried out in two universities, University of Botswana (UB) and Botswana Open University) BOU.

### **The impact of COVID 19 on the education system**

The impact of COVID 19 CPD can only be effectively discussed and understood when CPD is duly positioned within the broader framework of education systems and the impact of COVID on those. In response to the spread of the pandemic, and its rampant effects on Education, most governments put in place public health policies that restricted movement to control the spread of the virus, such as introducing social distancing, avoiding mass gathering, quarantine of infected patients and closure of public spaces (Jayanthi Rajendran & Kabriel, 2023) and lockdown of the economy. Consequently, schools, colleges, universities and other learning spaces around the world closed thereby disrupting the education system (Jayanthi Rajendran & Kabriel, 2023; Tarkar, 2020). According to Tarkar (2020), globally, around 90% of student population was affected by this closure because of the restrictions imposed by governments. This impact was experienced by 99% of low and middle income countries, aggravating prevailing education disparities as the provision of essential services to learners and communities were hampered (United Nations, 2020). Teaching and learning were abruptly discontinued due to sudden closure of the global learning community when campuses were

closed (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021) Therefore, institutions believed to be in the business of delivering learning were all of a sudden unable to meet the education and Training needs of people who wished to learn to succeed in their professional lives (Tarkar, 2020).

### **The impact of COVID19 on Continuing Professional Development**

The development of skills throughout life, also known as lifelong learning or continuing education plays a fundamental role in the training of people who are already part of the employment sector (Mlambo et al., 2021). Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is defined by Ingwu et al. (2019) as ‘...a systematic and ongoing process of education.... to ensure continuing competence, extended knowledge and skills often needed for new responsibilities or changing roles.’ Continuing Professional Development (CPD) therefore, is viewed by many as enabling the renewal and updating of knowledge, skills, capacities and confidence of employees (Perry, 2022; Windrim, Gan, & Kingdom, 2022). Roscoe (2002) states the following as some of the reasons for undertaking a professional development course: (i) that an employee may be required by an employer to undertake a specific course for career progression, or that it may be a mandatory condition by employer/s for enhanced professional practice, (ii) job performance enhancement, (iii) promotion and progression, (iv) career development for future opportunities beyond current employer, (v) to learn new skills, and (vi) as membership regulation to a professional body.

CPD is also viewed by some as having another purpose which is to enhance professionalism, professional competence/effectiveness and competitiveness of organisations (Collin, Van der Heijden, & Lewis, 2012). Attendance may be a requirement by the employer and or professional body/ies. Therefore CPD is important for both professional service quality improvement and economic development. (Collin et al., 2012). CPD is perceived to be something that all professionals should undertake to remain relevant in the global market (Roscoe, 2002). This is more so because qualifications are perceived to change at a high rate, and employees must keep up with the changes in the current labour market (Collin et al., 2012) to maintain specific skills levels to be professionally competent (Ingwu et al., 2019). It is evident on these bases that Universities the world over, UB and BOU included have as an integral part of their mandate, delivery of CPD programmes. They also use these programmes as sources of their third stream income for public institutions, to augment what they receive from government as their annual subvention and what they generate through students’ tuition fees.

For learning to continue during the pandemic, education systems had to rethink teaching and learning strategies, thereby being thrust towards emergency remote learning in most countries, such as radio, television and online lessons to reach basic education learners (Seble & Workut, 2020; United Nations, 2020; Winthrop, Ershadi, Angrist, Bortsie, & Matsheng, 2020). It is this radically changing or changed education landscape as a result of COVID 19 with a focus on Continuing Professional Development that this paper presents reflections on the two Universities as consequently, universities round the world were forced to make momentous adjustments by investing in online technologies pitched towards teaching and learning (Lock et al., 2021).

### **A shift in the landscape of education**

Evidently, the education sector was thrust towards emergency remote learning in most countries. Some institutions of higher learning( like UB and BOU shifted to online delivery of content learning (Ntshwarang, Malinga, & Losike-Sedimo, 2021). This marked rapid adoption of technological innovations to accommodate online learning environments (Jing, Dai, Wang, Shen, & Shadiev, 2024). Consequently, universities that were predominantly face-to-face learning environment oriented, in this case UB had to invest in technological innovations to survive thereby increasing the currency and prominence to the uptake of online learning (Xu & Xue, 2023)

.In other words the pandemic accelerated technological advancement and innovative approaches in the education system (United Nations, 2020) and constitute a paradigm shift (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The transition was made possible by information technologies and the internet driving the world economy (Gross, Ling, Richardson, & Quan, 2023). Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) highlight that this shift caught most institutions unaware and was a new experience for some educators and learners who had to adopt a new mode of learning that they were not prepared.

### **Methodology**

This paper presents insight from reflections by participants in the study as here described. The research was conducted from within the camp of qualitative research methodologies/ approaches which included Focus group discussions,

individual interviews and key Informant interviews. The research population was purposively sampled and the participants were categorized according to the roles they are known to play in Continuing Professional Development Programmes offer in the two Institutions. These were staff in the leadership of Units which are responsible for CPD and their administrative support staff (4), tutors in CPD programmes who are usually also involved in the design and delivery of these programmes (7). Out of these tutors more than half had also participated in some of the programmes before and during COVID 19 and the rest were (4) Key informants who were snowballed by the Researchers and some of the participants for sharing of their overall reflections from stakeholders' (insider and outsiders perspectives).

### **Presentation of Findings of the study and analysis**

According to (Windrim et al., 2022), COVID 19 negatively impacted delivery of Continuing Professional Development which was before COVID mainly delivered through face-to-face in person events. Perry (2022), giving examples from the UK says that these ways of educational delivery were halted in many institutions. This paper shares the findings of this study on CPD experiences from two universities in Botswana against the backdrop of COVID 19. These are insights and reflections sampled from both institutions comprised of tutors and administrators for continuing development programmes (PDC) programmes which institutions regularly offer to clients (Government, Private sector, Business industry, NGOa and any clients) that have either requested customer made training or have responded to adverts on the scheduled programmes.

The reflections were anchored on the thesis of the paper which presents a contrary view to COVID19 which is that, unlike the common perspective on the pandemic as having caused disruptions to development processes, the paper holds that the pandemic can in many respects be presented as having propelled change and innovation, and resilience for CPD in the context of two universities. These (innovation, resilience and sustainability) are presented with regard to the planning, pedagogical aspects, customer segmentation and others for CPD programmes..The view on COVID19 as having caused disruptions to development processes, the pandemic can in many respects be presented as having propelled innovative change, resilience and sustainability for CPD in the context of two universities.

Demonstrating why and how as a key issue of this paper, the pandemic could be viewed as having had a positive effect on CDP as an education and training activity within the context of the mission and mandates of universities in general and the two universities in particular, the participants in almost all of their categories share the same view as the researchers. They used specific experiences to illustrate and support their views. The participants used specific experiences to illustrate and support their views such as having during the three-year period of COVID19 seen for the first time for example, training programmes run using technological platforms, Microsoft TEAMS and Google, Moodle and others. For the participants, this was innovation because as they reflected, this enabled the trainers to bring together different players such as the IT departments, other institutional administrators into the fold of CPD which never used to be the case before (at least) not in the same manner as it did during COVID19.

The participants in a focus group further upheld the innovativeness which they say they had observed and said had yielded a team approach to CPD and also unearthed a different set of dynamics such as constant engagement with the clients. This in their view had to be the case because delivery of programmes through technology meant a two way process whereby there had to be discussions about whether facilities at the training institutions were effectively synchronised with those of the delivering institution. This was viewed as a first compared to the past where all the clients had to do was to send participants for training and the delivery burden left almost entirely with the delivering institution. This also is deemed to have enhanced relationships and mutual appreciation of what the business of concerned institutions is or was. This seems to have extended to beyond COVID19 relationships and yielded envisaged positive relationships and engagements in the CPD platform. Discussions on the positive assessment of the impact of COVID19 on CPD were extended into the area of economic factors. For this area the participants highlighted the cost effectiveness of delivering the training online which cut costs for use of physical space and on the cost of up keeping the trainees during the training process. For the participants, these accounts demonstrate innovativeness on the part of the Universities that had had no prior preparation for the pandemic. The on the ground situation dictated for them to think on their feet and this because as they reflected, this enabled the training organisers to bring together different players to work together to ensure training success. These (innovation, resilience and sustainability) are presented with regard to the planning, pedagogical aspects, customer segmentation and others for CPD programmes.

However, the participants also shared their reflections on technology mediated/ Online/ delivery of CPD programmes and the challenges that it presented, one of the most mentioned of these challenges was poor connectivity and erratic availability of related services. Finding solutions for this also was a team effort as they said. In their view this culminated in improved channels of communication involving requests for accommodations of the programmes by the IT departments, in their expert navigation of the systems and sometimes having to even seek clearance from service providers like the Power Corporation for the programmes to run with minimal hiccups. Another highlighted challenge was the effect of COVID 19 on the economy which overall made subscription to the CPD programmes relatively low as the institutions were testing the On line delivery approach to CPD.

Requested to reflect on the clients perceptions on the quality of the CPD programmes the Tutor research participants said that they have not noted any concerns from the clients about any compromises on the quality of the programmes between technology mediated and face to face delivery. They also reflected on the level of confidence that clients have on the ETP SERVICE and its product and said there does not seem to have been any drops in that regard attributing drops in the numbers of requests for training to the constrained economic situation as a nationwide challenge.

One of the Focus group participants observed that in the wake of COVID 19, all found themselves having to think outside the box and to intentionally and systematically question and rethink what they regarded as established strategies. The creativity and the new in perceptions that came with this mindset change was the reconceptualisation of one of the fundamental concepts in cultural studies. This was the concept of Norm with a focus on Change was a reconceptualisation of the idea of “norm” to introduce the idea of a new normal. Presenting the irony that surrounds COVID19 is not meant that the experience was without challenges which that are presented in this paper

### **Challenges posed by COVIDovid 19: a focus on CPD**

Participants in this study outlined the challenges for CPD programme which came with the identified opportunities to be creative, innovative and show some resilience towards the Pandemic. One such opportunity that the Institutions in this study seized was the Use of technology to deliver their CDP programmes and achieve business continuity. However the most discussed and experienced challenge in this connection was poor connectivity in their context. The participants concurred with the observation that, while some developed countries like China, United States, Australia, and South Korea may have had a seamless transition due to already existing digital infrastructure that made it possible to adjust within a shorter period (Camargo, Tempski, Busnardo, Martins, & Gemperli, 2020), some Asian and Sub-Sahara countries faced digital infrastructural challenges. This included undeveloped infrastructure, such as poor internet connectivity and at worst mismatches between their electronic devices and digital platforms (Faturoti, 2022; Xu & Xue, 2023). Another challenge was that some educators did not have skills required for online delivery and needed upskilling (Jayanthi Rajendran & Kabriel, 2023) and had to adapt new teaching methods as well as overcome engagement barriers of the type that this paper covers,.

These trainers and Educators found themselves challenged and tasked with implementation of technology mediated programmes without adequate training or resources and had to undergo professional development themselves as a practical antecedent for seizing the opportunity to use technology to deliver CPD programmes (United Nations, 2020). A related challenge to this one was the cost implications for the retooling of staff for the identified purpose in situations where such interventions had not been budgeted for.

Based on these reflections the participants responding to open ended questions around issues such as having to reflect on whether there were any noticeable post COVID I9 trends in opportunities and challenges that can inform plans for innovation resilience and sustainability of CPD within the two universities (at individual and institutional) the participants made the following recommendations:

- The researched organisations to pay more attention to connectivity and as a result divert a lot of resources towards upgrading their infrastructure for sustainable technology mediated delivery of their CPD programmes.
- The institutions to Intensify their efforts to ensure effectiveness in the use of technonology to deliver CPD to minimise the likely risk of programme participants connect but may not participate in learning therefore may be left out.
- *While I appreciate the innovative ways of CPD delivery, I feel that we still need face to face delivery so that we also don't take away the social aspect/ interactions/ networking that the learners would benefit from*
- There is room for improvement and it is important for us to be intentional and think carefully about what we want to do.

- There is a need to continuously train/ upskill CPD facilitators on designing programmes for online delivery and avail opportunities to apply the learnt skills.
- If all courses are taught online since it's cheaper more clients/institution would send their staff to the Cdp Programmes on offer..
- Post covid pandemic, we can convert what we learnt into opportunities for growth to inform future planning.
- Post covid, organisations needed to evaluate delivery of online CPDs, engage all stakeholders and build capacity so that should something similar happens, they would be prepared to handle it.
- Institutions to be intentional about the resiliens and sustainability of CPD.
- Some of the CPD programme participants do not have digital literacy to go to portal. ... some prefer announcements and assignments to be sent through WhatsApp..Tutor training? Develop CPDs LMS Portal - how to access, download materials, upload assignments.
- Invest in Digital marketing ; AI; Tiktok.
- Intensify Research on the Scholarship of Continuing Professional development as a lever for Sustainable Development

## Conclusion

It can be concluded from the foregoing that even though the COVID 19 pandemic disrupted established CPDs and their delivery, it can be said that there is so much that has been learnt from the experience. It is also evident from the presented reflections on the subject of study that none of the countries, their education systems and their institutions could be said to have been or that they were prepared to deal with the pandemic which was a new phenomenon. There are significant lessons to draw from it, or which have been drawn from the experience. It therefore, could be concluded that this makes it a viable springboard for change, This also seems to indicate that much as it cannot be fully celebrated for the harm that it caused to the world, in certain respects it deserves to be viewed as having had positive elements to it. Furthermore it can be concluded that while some of the changes it propelled were just reactions which were not planned, institutions and countries are able to look back and appreciate what they would not have been able to do had it not been for the Pandemic's developmental push factors. In the words of one participant in this study speaking to one of the researchers she said.... *Look at you interviewing me through WhatsApp from a very long distance when before COVID 19 we would perhaps been only able to think about using this platform as a last resort. concluding her reflections by saying the ...push by COVID 19 on us to urgently embrace technology has no doubt been a good thing.*

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