

COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Strengthening Research Practice in BRICS' Universities: A Reflective Study

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Abstract

South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2012) argues that there must be a simultaneous focus on research and teaching for South African universities to advance knowledge and society. However, since the dawn of COVID-19, most research focuses on teaching, leaving unattended research about doing and philosophising on research practice. Therefore, this paper rethinks ways of thinking and researching for postgraduate students who are based in South Africa's (SA's) historically disadvantaged institutions of higher learning. This paper proposes how COVID-19 should bring about a paradigm shift in research philosophy and research practice, including the necessary supervision support for post-graduate students. It employs the social constructivist paradigm as an analytical tool, drawing on the reflections of two postgraduate supervisors, and further reflects on broader paradigmatic issues within research. This paper relies strongly on the experiences of the authors as a primary source of data and is also conceptually harvested from the existing literature. The (auto)biographic element of the study allows the researchers to explore the intersection between themselves and the subject they are studying, thus permitting the reader to understand this intersection and reflect on their own experiences (Given, 2008). There are two main arguments in this paper: 1) A call for re-centring the ethics of care and the ethics of social responsibility as premises from which all research should start. This can be done by reflecting on and exploring the first-hand experiences of those who are in Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs). 2) It is a call for equitable distribution of resources across BRICS universities, focusing primarily on the improvement of the HDIs which is consistent with BRICS' multilateral developmental agenda.

Keywords: COVID-19, Research practices, BRICS, HDI, post-graduate students, social responsibility

Introduction

This article is organised into two main parts. Part one (sections two and three) is a contextualization of the study within the intersectionality between the supervisors and students which occurred during the times of their supervision and are underpinned by two specific details: 1) knowledge and knowledge production are not independent of our subjective experiences. If anything, our experiences provide us with a standpoint from which we can engage scientific discourse in our endeavours of knowledge production; and 2) all knowledge and knowledge production are contextual – not only concerning who we are, but also, where we are – and this is true for all knowledge producers (Collyer, Connell, Maia, and Morrell, 2019: 1). Part two (sections four to six) of this paper focuses on the philosophy and practice of scientific research, and details how we find COVID-19 helps us to improve these.

In the preface of his seminal work on the philosophy of science (arguably the most influential work on the subject in the 20th century), Kuhn (1970: v) gives a short autobiography of why he undertook to write the book. His own experience with knowledge and knowledge production set the stage for his engagement with the philosophy and practice of science, a lesson we draw from him. In this

paper, we reflect on what the emergence of COVID-19 offers for our practice of scientific research and research philosophy within the Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) in South Africa. Our contributions detail lessons being gained from studying and doing research, and how we make sense of such lessons under the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing this, we call on all knowledge producers to reflect on their own knowledge production experiences as catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The (auto)biographic element of the study allows the researchers to explore the intersection of their experiences and that of the post-graduate students, located within the context of research supervision and knowledge production (as the subjects they are studying), allowing the reader to understand this intersection, meanwhile reflecting on their own experiences (Given, 2008).

Studies such as the ones conducted by David and Moala (2017), David (2019), and Sidorova (2018) have considered the quality and world rankings of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) universities by relying on the neoliberal tradition of comparing universities. David and Motala (2017: 512) note that this ranking “give[s] meaning to notions such as excellent and world-class universities. The most fundamental aim in this regard is to provide an alternative economic force and the role higher education is playing...” Additionally, David and Motala (2017:513) assert that:

The growing youth population and the ever-increasing competition in the knowledge space in Brazil and India, the strong scientific basis in Russia, the established academia in South Africa and the massive industrialization that demands innovation in China continue to provide some positive hope without clear indications if BRICS will be able to give a new meaning to the notion of ‘world-class universities’ and build ivory towers of excellence.

On the other hand, Altbach and Bassett (2014) argued that comparing the BRIC (South Africa is excluded due to that paper’s broader argument) higher education systems was a futile exercise as the four countries’ systems were so different that they could not be compared meaningfully. The criticism by Altbach and Bassett (2014) is also relevant within the context of COVID-19. As a catalyst, COVID-19 shows that the exercise of ranking universities based on their performance cannot provide us with a holistic understanding of their nature if we do not explore their historical materialism, their impact on communities, students, and staff as a priority, particularly within the HDIs. Thus, considering the importance of research practice and research philosophy that guides the practice of research, this paper deals with the question of how best COVID-19 offers us an opportunity to rethink and relearn what is important, while we unlearn destructive research practices and research philosophies during the process of knowledge production within the HDIs in South Africa. The paper relies strongly on the experiences of the authors as primary sources and harvests conceptually from existing literature.

Intersectionality between Supervisors and Students

This section expounds on the intersectionality of our experiences as supervisors and our students which Andriopoulou and Prowse (2020: 649) term “The research supervisory relationship.” Additionally, these authors argue that a “supervisory relationship is first and foremost a human relationship governed by the rules of human communication and interaction” (Andriopoulou and Prowse, 2020: 657), which ties in closely with our section on research philosophy.

We are young emerging academics pursuing our doctoral degrees, primarily responsible for teaching both undergraduate and postgraduate students. We supervise students’ honours research projects and master’s (MA) dissertations within an HDI, where we are expected to undergo rigorous research processes and practices. Mills (2000) counsels:

We cannot adequately understand 'man' as an isolated biological creature, as a bundle of reflexes or a set of instincts, as an 'intelligible field' or a system in and of itself. Whatever else he may be, man is a social and a historical actor who must be understood, if at all, in close and intricate interplay with social and historical structures.

With this argument, Mills (2000) counsels that a reflection upon one's experience must consider structures in which the milieu of such experiences are organized. Both the authors have undergone enjoyable times and challenging times. Completing a master's (MA) dissertation or a thesis is a very lonely and seriously independent journey. Under any normal circumstances, it is a journey that demands self-reliance, resilience, focus, time, financial support, study materials, and many other important resources that may enable the completion of the study. Such resources may include, but are not limited to, access to the library, internet connectivity (for information search) and a conducive environment for studying. This understanding provides the authors with an insight into the experiences of the students regarding the fact that they co-produce knowledge through research. The supervision of students' research studies becomes such a practice – a co-production of knowledge.

A Brief History of the Higher Education System and HDIS in South Africa

The HDIs in South Africa are universities that were established to serve the non-white populace (black, coloured, and Indian) when apartheid laws prohibited the mixing of different races in the same institutions of higher education. The establishment of these universities was based on racial and ethnic lines. In this case, Adonis & Silinda (2021) observes that race appears to continue being a characterisation mechanism of social life in South Africa to date. The main purpose of this establishment was to inculcate an institutional culture that would ensure that the non-whites received an inferior education while the whites received a superior education. Additionally, one of the mechanisms of guaranteeing this was by ensuring that most of these universities were built away from modern resources (such as being outside of urban centres). Another key feature of HDIs is that they were under-funded and are still heavily reliant on government funding (Bengu, 2021).

Most students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to experience limitations regarding advanced infrastructure and technologies that best promote knowledge production and best research practice. In a Department of Higher Education and Training presentation to Norwegian delegates, Bengu (2021) explains the inequality and inequities embedded in the architectural and functioning of the higher education structural systems as a mechanism of ensuring that the education service to the non-white populace in South Africa remains inferior and that it provides no service to the communities. This is due to the "systematic political oppression, social discrimination, and economic exploitation of black people during colonial and apartheid rule" (Badat, 2010 cited in Adonis & Silinda, 2021: 74). Additionally, the Council on Higher Education (1996), as cited in Adonis & Silinda (2021: 74), emphasises that:

The structuring of the higher education system was developed with these aims in mind and resulted in a fragmented higher education system consisting of highly advantaged institutions that catered for whites and that were well resourced, on the one hand, and, on the other, severely disadvantaged institutions with limited resources catering for blacks.

This structuring of the higher education system sought to undermine the non-white populace's education and their capabilities to autonomously achieve upward social mobility and contribute

to the development of their societies' economy. Thus, it is critical to consider this context in our reflection and analysis.

In the current epoch of the COVID-19 pandemic, we witness universities finding themselves faced with what Thomas Kuhn (1972) calls the emergence of a paradigm shift. COVID-19 as a global pandemic exposes the experiences that would otherwise be hidden. These include political, economic, and cultural inequality in the world. In the main, such inequality is the result of the legacy of colonial and apartheid rule, particularly, in terms of equitable distribution and access to resources within universities. In South Africa, this is a reality among the HDIs such as the University of Limpopo, Walter Sisulu University, University of Venda, and the University of Zululand where this inequality continues to exist. As explained by DHET (2013: 80),

The disadvantaged universities, particularly those in the rural areas of the former Bantustans, are still disadvantaged in terms of infrastructure, teaching facilities and staffing. Coupled with this, there are some institutions within the system that continue to show signs of instability and dysfunction.

In their research which aimed at analysing the impact of the COVID-19 on the university activity directions in the framework, Rababah, *et. al.* (2021: 2) argue that in "BRICS countries education is seen as a tool for social and economic development, thus they need to ensure their systems and content are of high quality." However, in the context of South Africa, the challenges cannot be tackled using a one-size-fits-all model. The Historical Disadvantaged Institutions require specific urgent attention, mainly to improve their infrastructures such as computer labs, better-resourced libraries, and student residences, especially, for the universities based in the rural areas (DHET, 2013; Ayuk & Koma, 2017). Nyahodza and Higgs (2017: 39) noted that the historically disadvantaged university libraries are still faced with a challenge to meet what they call "patrons' demand through the provision of relevant infrastructure, services, and information-related skills to enable users to function in the digital information age." These include basic computer literacy and the use of online library catalogues, all of which are important skills for postgraduate researchers – perhaps more so when they cannot access campus due to COVID-19 and are expected to work more independently. Nyahodza and Higgs (2017: 42) call this challenges a "digital divide that occurs as a result of a lack of exposure to interact with ICTs, as a result, it affects access to e-services that enhance education."

Nyahodza and Higgs (2017: 39) show that although at the University of Western Cape (one of South Africa's HDIs), the students' access to the e-services is satisfactory, challenges "encountered include internet connection, security concerns, shortcomings in information literacy, problems of access and accessibility (including language), and reluctance to engage with unfamiliar technology." It must be noted that these are findings before the advent of the COVID-19; however, we have observed similar challenges with our students both before and during COVID-19 where they could not attend online research training workshops, consultations, and seminars because of a lack of access to advanced ICT devices.

Destructive and Constructive Interventions

As a science, research philosophy and practice cannot escape what Kuhn (1972) calls destruction (what is done away with) and construction (what emerges) as they progress. In any form of world order, it is the human being who is the primary agent in the construction of the social sphere. Therefore, to take stock of how COVID-19 strengthens research philosophy and practice, we need to re-centre the human being in research philosophy, BRICS universities, and research practice. In other words, we need to inculcate the idea of Botho as a research philosophy that guides our research practice.

BRICS needs to trackback to ideas like *Botho* (which promotes people's individual and collective wellbeing on African humanism) and *Buen Vivir* (loosely translated as a good life), which inform pedagogies of sustainable relationships, genuine care for people, and supervision that comes from the ethics of care and social responsibility. *Botho* is an African philosophy that centres people as the most important beings, thus each person's actions must be considered concerning the effects they are likely to have on other people. This philosophy is underpinned by behaviours such as friendliness, generosity, kindness, and good treatment of the natural environment for the benefit of all people (Molefe, 2019). On the other hand, *Buen Vivir* is a South American philosophy of life that argues against the capitalist priorities of consumption (especially at the cost of the natural environment) and promotes that people see themselves as being part of nature and the ecological system, not above them. In doing so, it encourages austerity and enjoyment of life that is not linked to materialism (Chuchi, Regnifo, and Gudynas, 2019). On these bases, Kothari, Salleh, Escobar, Demaria, and Acosta (2019) argue that the implementation of *buen vivir* and *botho* encourages ethics of care and social responsibility, which we agree can be beneficial in the realms of supervision and knowledge production – where the processes and the outputs thereof will be to the benefit of both people and the natural environment.

An adoption of the ethics of care and the ethics of social responsibility will strike a balance amidst the fast development of new technologies that appear to fail to create sustainable moral guidance (De Villiers, 2020). According to Ntombana (2011: 27-28) "Moral regeneration of the nation formally became the 28 responsibilities of the government, communities, schools, households as well as individuals." For example, like the initiation schools (whose purpose is to improvement society) in Africa (Maharasoia and Majaraswa, 2004), the BRICS universities must have the communities in their research policies and rankings criteria when providing education as a social good. Moreover, while university rankings' methodologies and rubrics focus on the quality of research and outputs, the well-being of students and supervisors does not seem to be as much a priority as the research outputs are, which is a matter of concern as the outputs seem to be more important than their producers.

Thus, we need to rethink the meaning of research and the usefulness thereof under the COVID-19 era and consider what the role of research should be. This as we are called to social practices that show care for oneself and other through measures such as physical distancing to protect one another. We need to slow down the rate at which we consume products, produce research outputs, expect students to function, *inter alia* (Hartmen & Darab, 2021), to heal the person and the planet. Thus universities should not obsess with throughput rates at the expense of the quality of their research, supervision, and the wellbeing of their students and staff.

We consider the adoption of local philosophies in supervision as one important option. For instance, in Sesotho (one of South Africa's indigenous languages), the words for leader (*moetapele*), supervisor (*moeletsi* – advisor), and student (*moithuti*) have the prefix "mo-", which denotes that before one is anything else in society, they are human (Mogobe, 2002). In applying such an ethics of care, we must see students as human beings before seeing them as potential outputs to increase throughput rates. We must approach them with care and sincerity, not with a materialistic attitude. This must be an organizing principle for any form of knowledge production that will improve the post-COVID-19 society.

Thus, the philosophies (such as *botho* and *buen vivir*) of BRICS countries need to be prioritized to create a world that is truly post-colonial, globalized, yet heterogeneous; we must recognise that not all people share the same worldview. Therefore, BRICS does not need to try and assimilate into the colonial past but must map new paths of existence for itself through research and education. In such a context, the above-mentioned philosophies offer better ways of caring about people and the environment.

The supervision relationship is critical for knowledge production and strengthens co-production of knowledge, as opposed to strengthening the power dynamics that come with the hierarchical arrangement of a supervisor and supervisee relationship. The latter is “influenced by the demands of the project itself and the institutional processes [as well as] factors such as social position, culture and unequal power, personality and identity, and relational patterns (Andriopoulou & Prowse (2020: 651).

It is in this light that this paper offers a reflection on the experiences of the young emerging scholars who are also bestowed with the responsibility of supervising postgraduate students. We realize that education is not an end unto itself, but people need to go back to communities and serve. This hits at the core of what it means to be a human being. In other words, this moves beyond the accessibility of resources and deals with how, as human beings, we relate to one another in the world, because it is this critical understanding of what it means to be a human being that appears to be a distribution vehicle for resources needed for our survival. As Illich (1971) argued, a good system of education cares about people’s access to resources for their and the communities’ wellbeing.

In BRICS Universities

Under COVID-19, the BRICS countries’ universities find themselves faced with what Kuhn would call destruction and construction, which are ties that bind them together. In a memorandum of agreement, Sanjay Dhotre, the Minister of State for Education, Communications, Electronics, and Information Technology, stated that:

online learning and digital delivery of education have emerged as important means for achieving education sector development goals. It is, therefore, necessary that we recognize the importance of leveraging technology to promote access to inclusive and equitable quality education for all (Dhotre, 2021).

Moreover, Dhotre (2021), cited in Mint (2021) during the 8th education ministers meeting of BRICS countries, makes the following remark about digital and technological solutions:

We also acknowledge the need to reduce and eventually eliminate the digital divide that restricts the full realization of this potential. There is, therefore, a need to intensify efforts to eliminate disparity in access to digital resources, including digital devices, especially in the case of socially and economically disadvantaged population groups.

Such an endeavour will enhance the universities’ social responsibility (USR) as one of the important criteria for understanding universities’ impact (Rababah, 2021). Additionally, if the scientific research practice in these institutions is urgently prioritized, it will also enhance their participation in the socio-economic and political decisions that appear during this pandemic. Thus, they will be more influential in the way strategies of mitigating the spread of COVID-19 are constructed and improve the research practice among postgraduate students (Jusuf, 2020).

In their paper titled “Business evolution in the lens of universities’ sustainable impact: Russian lessons in BRICS”, Belyaeva and Bentsion (2016) note that:

Currently, the university’s function is not only to train students for various vocations but also to enhance social relevance, rather than simply issuing diplomas, to encourage students to find their direction and think beyond individual interests towards societal interest. This means that through socially responsible behaviour, universities demonstrate that they know and can respond to current social issues both through

personal projects related to community development and through educational programs, which educate young people to become socially responsible individuals and equal participants in creating positive social change.

We argue that it is essential for the BRICS countries to construct their functionality in society and primarily train students to be socially responsible, particularly through research. As explained above, with the adoption of research paradigms that are drawn from philosophies such as *botho* and *buen vivir*, students can be equipped with ethics of care and social responsibility. While these two philosophies may be a good place to start at the level of research projects and supervision philosophies, we find that intervention at the structural level is also necessary to challenge how universities as institutions function. This is even critical in the context of COVID-19 where apprenticeship and day-to-day ethical dealings of the people are key social facts of knowledge production and knowledge dissemination. We follow Illich's (1971), albeit with some adaptations, view that a meaningful system of education prioritizes three main issues, and we believe that BRICS universities would benefit from positioning themselves as such:

- "It should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives."

As we previously explained, it is not enough to accept students into HDIs or universities, there must be sufficient resources for the students to succeed. This includes having the right proportion of students to supervisors, electronic devices, and other resources explained above. These are some of the challenges South Africa's Department of Higher Education and Training (2013) has acknowledged; we believe that if they are overcome, there will be great progress in the country's research landscape. The DHET acknowledges that since 1994, there has been an improvement in the publication practices in SA, but there has remained a low increase in the number and demographics of researchers, and this is not healthy for research practice (DHET, 2013).

- "It should empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them."

Knowledge and expertise must be opened to the multiple sources from which it is available. It would be beneficial for universities to work with and learn from local communities within which they exist. This is key not only for the enrichment of the knowledge they produce but also for universities' response to the needs of communities. One way in which this is achievable is to ensure that the processes of research are deeply embedded in community engagement and that researchers build archives of local knowledge, both historical and current. According to Masoga (2002:5) "In this process, the opportunity arises for 'trained' researchers to gain deeper insight of the realities of the margin-space discourse." The very use of *botho* and *buen vivir* provides this opportunity as these philosophies are lived out by communities (Kothari et al., 2019; Molefe, 2019). Masoga and Shokane (2018: 4) counsel that the aforementioned "advocates collective responsibility for one another as a value and philosophy for mutual coexistence and compassion." Moreover, this practice would involve having local custodians of local knowledge collaborating with universities as organic intellectuals such as has been seen in the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Mvelashe, 2020).

- "It should furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known."

BRICS universities must always be open to multiple views and criticism. In SA, this has happened on multiple occasions such as the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework after democratisation (South African Qualifications Authority, 2020). Another critique of the education system that has been met with much consideration was the calls for decolonisation of the university

curriculum (Matthews, 2021), which is a continuing debate in SA institutions of higher learning. Our view is that this is good and should continue to take place not only in the curriculum but also in the very institutional culture of these institutions and that of the communities in which these institutions function. Additionally, we are of the view that the students with whom we co-produce knowledge through supervision and research become our peers and colleagues; therefore, we are collectively entrusted with the critical responsibility to prioritise the construction of an ethical, equal, and just society. In this case, COVID-19 provides us with an opportunity to cultivate such a habitus.

In Research Practice

In dealing with serious strategies that may enable convivial access to digital resources and strike a 'balance' between universities while also promoting teaching and learning, research practice is still receiving less immediate attention (than teaching and learning). This places a great deal of focus on research as a primary business of the university for knowledge production. Thus, in the context of this paper, we argue that this gap should be given serious attention. It must also be noted that the attention is more reflective of the experiences we have encountered during our engagements with the students that we are supervising as well as our own experiences as researchers. It is also being observed that even in terms of digitalization of research practice, there is still a challenge on the question of immediate person-to-person contact – a traditional or conservative approach to research practice and supervision.

One of the implications and realities is that most of the student populace come from low-socio-economic families. This compromises the students' ability to afford data, as South African data rates are the third most expensive in the BRICS countries (IOL, 2018)). It is also important, at this juncture, to point out that South Africa is the most socioeconomically unequal of the 5 BRICS countries – and that HDIs tend to cater mostly to students in the lower end of SA's society. In addition to this, there are challenges with infrastructure such as network, which interfere with the ability to hold online meetings effectively universities are now forced to turn to new supervision and meeting methods, including blended learning. The COVID-19 has brought about a qualitative shift even in the communities that students are coming from and those they are conducting their research on and in.

The limitations of COVID-19 have meant researchers have had limited time and physical interaction for fieldwork. This calls for a re-thinking and creativity around methods like ethnography and participant observation. This calls for us to rethink the idea of "being there", in the field of research. Our reflexive journals would be filled with observations of our journeys to and from the field for data collection. These methods also come with their ethical considerations. The critical question is how we maintain the security of online meetings in the age of laws that change slowly to meet the fast-paced cyber-security challenges that we have (Sandor, 2002).

Emersion in the field either from the emic or etic perspective allows one to learn and relearn the different social dynamics that permeate people's life experiences, even outside of one's research questions, to learn what shapes people's lives. This has led to areas in research such as reflexivity, where a researcher documents experiences about their research which shapes the final output of their work (both their dissertation and the conclusions). The destruction of face-to-face data collection limits the researcher's ability to interact with participants in a natural setting. This also adds to the need for an added layer of privacy or security when communicating through online mediums which we argue must be undertaken without developing exploitative technologies and laws.

Furthermore, this raises questions about resources such as digital devices and networks for participants. Where qualitative data collection has come to lean heavily on seeing the participants,

how does the researcher verify the identity of the participant on digital mediums, especially phone calls? And if the researcher wants to interview participants on platforms like Zoom, who should pay for the participant's data? Therefore, there is a need to rethink some of the paradigms which promote or have led to the development of destructive technologies – these include forms of positivism that promoted destructive modernization which is insensitive to the environment. This raises ethical questions where participants are not to be incentivized or remunerated in the context of voluntary participation. Construction speaks to the digitalisation of data collection that calls for innovative thinking about conducting fieldwork with limited resources. This is realised when COVID-19 opens the door for technological advancements for research methodologies and when it speeds up the need for thinking more urgently about research philosophies and practice. For this, we believe *Botho* and *buen vivir* as underlying philosophies are instrumental in BRICS countries.

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the impacts of COVID-19 on research and proposed how the pandemic offers an opportunity for scholars to slow down (Hartman and Darab, 2012) and reflect to improve their paradigms and practices as researchers. Drawing on the history and context of South Africa, we have shown how context can limit the ability to undertake high-quality research. Our call is for the re-centring of the ethics of care and the ethics of social responsibility such as *buen vivir* and *botho* as the starting point of all research. We argue that this is achievable through equitable provision of resources to BRICS countries' universities, which is consistent with BRICS' endeavours towards development. In doing so, we debunk leaning on the neoliberal fascination with university rankings that position outputs as more important than the people who produce them or see students themselves as outputs. By submitting our reflections as postgraduate supervisors and researchers in a South African HDI and how our experiences have shaped our views on the philosophy and practice of research as explained in section 2 of the paper, we suggest a path those other researchers can follow to strengthen research philosophy and the practice of scientific research (Kuhn, 1972). Thus, we host to the observation of COVID-19 as created an urgent space where the BRICS countries have to relook research philosophy and practice by equipping their HDIs with the advanced technologies that will improve their contribution into knowledge production and development.

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