Article

Organisational Culture of South African Higher Education in the post COVID-19 Period

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Abstract: Practising organisational culture is indispensable in boosting sustainable development of various organisations. However, lately it has been shrouded with confusion especially in the post COVID-19 crisis which prompted this study to investigate its current stature. The gradual disappearance of pandemic era gave birth to a new complex and challenging space for human resource management professionals in approximately 426 South African higher education institutions in both public and private sectors, who are compelled to find ingenious solutions around bringing sound and competitive organisational culture. Although there are vast studies that uncover different issues related to COVID-19 pandemic, few previous studies to date have been conducted regarding the change of organisational culture at the workplace in the post COVID-19 pandemic period. Since few prior studies have been carried out in both public and private academic institutions, the purpose of this study is to explore the organisational culture in the post COVID-19 pandemic period of South African Higher Education. The study utilised a qualitative research approach. In terms of data gathering, the phenomena were scoured for in journals using the desktop reviewing method. The desktop approach was used to find the answers to the research questions by consulting published literature, online databases, reports and online indexes. This assists to create a comprehensive understanding of the subject and propose a corrective plan of action.

Keywords: organisational culture; COVID-19; crisis; higher education; South Africa

Introduction

Unstable organisational culture is usually regarded as the main cause of efforts to bring about innovation failing to be implemented, which in turn hamper organisational development. It is argued that organisational culture is the conduit by which the vision of the institution flows or obstructed because a vision is supported by many social groups with varied beliefs, norms and values, which are inherent to the institutions. With little information on how coronavirus change organisational culture in higher and tertiary education, this study reviews literature relating to the organisational culture in the post Covid-19 period. Higher education institutions face challenges in the implementation of organisational culture change in the post COVID-19, having to embrace new ideas while consider circumstances of a distraction.

According to Kramer and Kramer (2020), change affects all organisations, whether private or public. Furthermore, accepting change depends on the employees that are involved, and the type of business conducted, which becomes a threat. According to Mhlanga and Moloi (2020), as COVID-19 pandemic subside and eventually vanish, management of most academic found themselves engaging in new culture which some employees felt has unexpected ripple effect of previous work norm of complete remote work.

Consequently, some skilled employees quit their current institutions and move to other institutions that still embrace total remote work, while those remain in the organisation experience psychological and emotional distress of another culture change. This cause employees to disengage and become unproductive (Williams, McIntosh & Russell, 2021). Despite the poorly established body of knowledge around organisational culture at the workplace, little has been done to understand the changes in the organisational culture that are currently taking place in the post COVID-19 period.

While substantial studies have been published concerning the educational system during COVID-19 pandemic, little has been researched about the current situation in higher education in the post COVID-19 period. The aspect of organisational culture has been overlooked yet it plays an integral role in Higher education performance. The significance of managing organisational culture is a fascinating conversation for researchers (Bakhri, Udin, Daryono & Suharnomo, 2018). Bakhri, Udin, Daryono and Suharnomo (2018:175) further state that organisational culture can have significant effect, particularly when the culture is strong (strong culture) and has worked well enough to be considered valid. However, the earlier studies fall short of conceptualising the organisational culture in the post COVID period. Hence, the primary objective of this paper is to explore the changes of organisational culture of South African Higher education in the post COVID-19 period. The paper sought explore the challenges associated with the change in organisational culture in the post COVID-19 pandemic period. In addition, the paper sought to evaluate the importance of having sound organisational culture in the post COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Framework
This study is guided by two models, namely Kotter and Heskett's Model and Kurt Lewin's Model. These models complement each other in endeavour to inform this study. Kotter and Heskett (2011) identify that there are two levels of organisational culture which differ in their visibility and resistance to change. On a deeper and less visible level, culture refers to a group's shared values, which tend to persist over time, even when membership of a group changes. In a more visible level, culture represent organisations style or behaviour patterns whereby new employees are encouraged to follow their fellow colleagues with regards to the protocols implemented in the post COVID-19 pandemic period.

Memon (2021) state that Kurt Lewin's change models is conceptualised as three steps (unfreezing which is an old behaviour, - changing which is moving to a new step of behaviour – refreezing the behaviour to the desired new step. These are three phases of change. Saleem, Sehar, Afzal, Jamil and Gilani (2019) identify these three phases as unfreezing or disconfirmation, cognitive restructuring and freezing. Furthermore, Endrejat and Burnes (2022) clarify that an unfreezing phase implies that people on target should unlearn and learn something – cognitive restructuring suggest that once an organisation has been unfrozen, change proceeds to next learning during refreezing processes the new behaviour is reinforced. In this framework we present drastically change of organisational culture post COVID-19 pandemic era in higher education institutions that have identified change as a basic value within a refreezing phase.

2. The Aspect of the COVID-19 Pandemic
Wang, Liu, Qian and Parker (2020) state that Covid-19 was first reported in December 2019, in Hubei province the city of Wuhan in China. Thereafter, COVID-19 spreaded to several countries. COVID-19 was caused by the new virus labelled SARS-CoV-2 (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). The infection presented as a fever and cough. SARS-CoV-2 belongs to the family Coronaviridae, order Nido-virales. Dai, Hu, Xiong, Qiu and Yuan (2020) reveal that COVID-19 was originally discovered in the 1093s, where several coronaviruses caused respiratory, gastrointestinal, liver, and neurological disease on poultry animals. Dhawan (2020) affirms that COVID-19 took place in China in December 2019 and late in January 2020, the World Health Organisations (WHO) announced it as an international public health issue which was classified in March as a pandemic.

In addition, in South Africa COVID-19 was reported as the first confirmed case on the 5 March 2020, with a national state disaster proclaimed by government on the 15 March 2020 and a national lockdown was later enforced on the 27 March 2020 to avoid overwhelming of the first wave to health system (Harper, 2020;

Duma & Utete, 2023). Furthermore, SARS-CoV-2 is the seventh coronavirus to infect the human species and most life-threatening as it claimed more than one million of people's life. Although scores of scholars have recently researched on COVID-19 and the studies on organisational culture are scant, hence this study broadens the literature on COVID-19 by bringing a new antecedent of this construct in the post-pandemic period.

Regardless of industry, the advent of COVID-19 virus inadvertently shook abruptly and extensively various aspects in different workplaces around the world. Organisational culture could not be spared as it is a major part of the activities at the workplace. Some workplace policies and practices that form component of culture had to change overnight. When the COVID-19 virus was first detected in December 2019, the world of work was unprepared for what happened next (Azman and Abdullah, 2022). In the connected world of today, environmental, economic, health, educational and social problems encountered in one country, can quickly escalate into global issues. Both public and private organisations seem to have been caught unaware as the virus had spread by the end of January 2020, gradually changing into a global epidemic. Hence, procedures normally followed at the workplace when changing culture were suddenly ignored and rendered useless. As a result, that time, organisations were compelled to shut down for an extended period of time, affecting employees in different sectors (The World Bank, 2020). However, the educational sector took the attention of various stakeholders because deals with young people who hold the future of the next generation.

3. The Concept of Organisational Culture

Davis and Dolson (2018) define organisational culture as the pattern of shared fundamental beliefs that a group developed as it worked through issues of outward adaptation and internal integration. According to Taye, Guoyuan and Muthanna (2019), culture has been at the forefront in day-to-day debates as a well-known issue and became an agenda within organisations. Furthermore, cultural norms define what is encouraged, discouraged, accepted, or rejected within a group. However, people's interaction and response to change are the two fundamental dimensions that apply regardless of organisations geography, industry, size and type (Groysberg, Lee, Price & Cheng 2018). Additionally, to understand where organisation culture falls need to determine these two dimensions. People's interaction is defined as an organisation's attitude toward people's interaction and coordination, which ranges from highly independent to highly interdependent. Based on reviewed literature, the concept of organisational culture has received the least attention particularly in higher education institutions. Hence, this study contributes to organisational culture literature.

4. COVID-19 Pandemic and Organisational Culture

In higher education, resistance to change of culture is worsened and perpetuated by students who prefer online learning than physical learning hence become greatest threat to organisational change efforts (Mncube, Mutongoza & Olawale, 2021). Management of academic institutions inadvertently forced to embrace physical face-to-face work as loadshedding incessantly take its toll in the province disrupting internet networks (Kort & Chipunza, 2022). In addition, as poverty deepened due to devastation of COVID-19 pandemic, most first year do not have digital gadgets to use for online learning. Hence, employees (lecturers) are compelled to contact lessons physically and rarely online. Still growing academic institutions like vocational colleges grapple as they experience the challenges extensively than any established institutions. Despite organisations still dealing with large-scale changes in the way they work, human resource management and executive leaders are concerned about the stability of culture in the workplace (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). Importantly, many organisations are concerned that their culture may suffer confusion if not does not adequate attention, and they are unsure how to sustain values and ideals if staff members do not have consistent work culture. Thus, the study seeks to explore the change of organisational culture in the post COVID-19 pandemic period.

5. The State of Higher Education in South Africa

Although the higher education has become accessible to even the most disadvantaged students, the constant change of culture recently brought confusion. In South Africa, the government fully funds 26 universities, seven of which are listed in the QS world ranking (Muhuro & Kangethe, 2021). Prospects and pitfalls associated with implementing blended learning in rural-based higher education institutions in Southern Africa.

In addition, there are over 50 higher education training colleges and more than 300 private institutions which make up South Africa's higher education system. Nearly one million students are enrolled in the public universities in South Africa (Cloete, 2014). In this context, for creating and maintaining sound organisational culture of these institutions and keep them relevant and focused, higher education institutions are often run in line with a mission statement and goals that are widely shared. In fact, organisational culture is seen as the conduit through which the institution's vision flows or obstructed because a vision is supported by the many social groups' varied values, conventions and beliefs.

There are four categories of the Department of Higher Education and Training in South Africa, namely traditional universities, comprehensive universities, university of technologies, government vocational colleges and private colleges. Since they are made up of various social groups, higher education institutions (HEIs) have a complex nature (Motala & Menon, 2020). While academic institutions uphold a set of ideals that cannot be simply altered, society has an impact on the fundamental duties of HEIs. Since the growth and development of these institutions are greatly influenced by how they adapt to changes in the external environment over time, the organisational culture of HEIs plays a crucial role.

Methodology

The study utilised a qualitative research approach. The selection of the research approach was based on the nature of the study, which placed significant emphasis on scrutinising past literature to establish a coherent framework of South African higher education's organisational culture in the post COVID-19 crisis. This study employed a qualitative research approach, specifically a descriptive analysis of literature. The process of descriptive analysis in literature primarily involves the consolidation and integration of existing research studies pertaining to a particular area of interest. Notwithstanding the scarcity of logical theories and models in this domain of inquiry, an exhaustive descriptive examination of antecedent literature was undertaken to uncover the current situation of organisational culture. The selection of the research approach for this study helped to attain the study's objectives and resolve the problem. In terms of data gathering, the phenomena were scoured for in journals using the desktop reviewing method. The desktop approach was used to find the answers to the research questions by consulting published literature, online databases, reports and online indexes.

Findings and Discussion

1. The Changes of Organisational Culture in The Post COVID-19 Crisis Period

COVID-19 pandemic brought confusion in higher education institutions. In higher education institutions, educators and support staff experience a lot of trials and error ever after it disappeared (Lemoine & Richardson, 2020; Suharnomo, Yuniawan, Wahyudi & Wikaningrum, 2017). In higher education learning, the culture of digitalisation appeared to be unavoidable even in the post COVID-19 period. The penetration of digital aspect and virtual element in educational institutions has dropped in scale but still recognised in the traditional teaching and will not cease to exist in the way they are now (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). In the post-COVID-19, numerous higher education institutions are grappling for best practices which can form part of their culture to raise the academic excellence and remain competitive in the learning space (Dison, Padayachee, De-Klerk, Conradie, MacAlister, Moch & Krull, 2022).

In delving deeper into the concept of authentic accessibility, increasing higher education accessibility through promoting sound organisational culture is a multidimensional and complex social issue requiring more clarification, as well as implementation initiatives in higher educational institutions (Moodley, 2022; Lee, 2017). Having been used to online teaching for over two years, some academic staff find it difficult to revert to full-scale traditional face-to-face teaching. The shift to former or new organisational culture should not be hastened but needs to be taken gradually. As COVID-19 lapsed, higher education institutions (HEIs) immediately responded by shifting teaching and learning (T&L) activities from absolute online to hybrid and traditional face-to-face working (Alex, 2022; Cobo-Rendon, Jofre, Lobos, San-Martin & Guzman, 2022). Due to the changes happened during coronavirus pandemic such as online working, in the aftermath of the pandemic some higher education institutions introduce distance learning (remote learning). A new culture of

hybrid learning has been adopted in the post COVID-19 crisis especially for postgraduate students (Shava, 2022). This changes the practices of academic staff in terms how they carry out their duties.

Like any other well-established institutions, higher education institutions experience resistance to change as the changes become highly unstable and regular (Naidoo, 2022; Hussain, Lei, Akram, Haider, Hussain & Ali, 2018). It becomes a daunting activity to employees as they move from face-to-face to online during COVID-19 pandemic, then from online to hybrid system in the post COVID-19 pandemic period. The new culture of hybrid work in the post COVID-19 pandemic is breeding an array of highly illegal and unethical issues such discrimination, nepotism, favouritism and inequality in different positions whether permanent employees or contractual employees (Wang & Sun, 2022; Li, 2023).

Despite the end of many problems as COVID-19 crisis vanish, the post-pandemic period comes with new culture which demands flexibility and versatility from employees (Cobo-Rendon, Jofre, Lobos, San Martin and Guzman, 2022). Unfortunately, some employees are not ready to adapt to the new organisational culture demands as swiftly as expected by the institutions. Furthermore, in South Africa higher education institutions are facing numerous opportunistic difficulties that came to be major in the post COVID-19 pandemic period (Mhlanga, Denhere & Moloi, 2022; Makombe, 2021). While some academic institutions adopt a new organisational culture of hybrid work, some institutions return to full-scale physical face-to-face work which some employees fail to copy. The latter new culture leads to records of high absenteeism, absconding of work, some quit their current institution preferring organisations that still embrace remote work culture.

2. Challenges Associated with The Change in Organisational Culture in The Post COVID-19 Pandemic Period
Affordability, accessibility, flexibility, lifelong work, and dynamic policies have been identified as some of the challenges with new culture of hybrid work environment (Chiramba & Maringe, 2022). Due to this new culture (Figure 1), reports of unfair discrimination, inequality and favouritism have been received from different workplaces. This is because some work positions demand physical presents of an employee at the workplace only while some jobs may allow employees to have both physical and remote work. However, in South Africa higher education, online has been recently blowed by loadshedding (Linders, 2021) (Figure 1) which constantly interrupt internet connections.
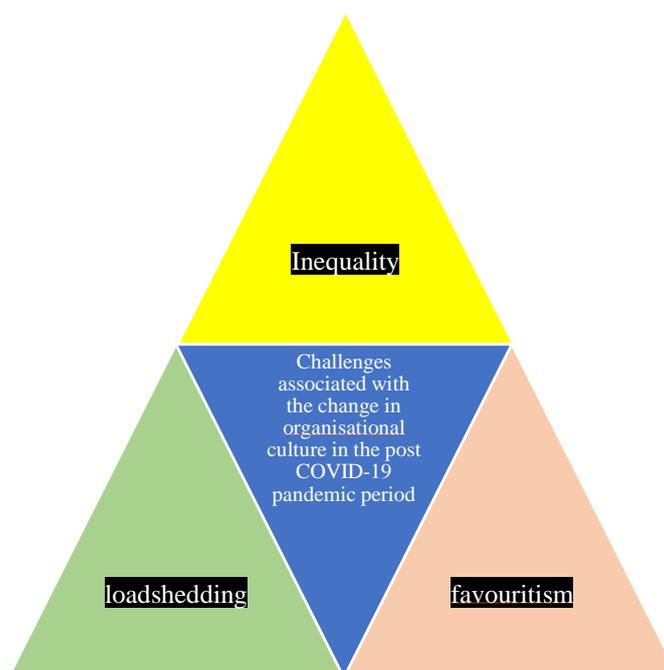

Figure 1. Challenges in post COVID-19 pandemic period
Source: Authors' Analysis (2023)

In addition, lack of access to digital devices among students especially first year students push most institutions to regularly use face-to-face teaching than online teaching (Dhawan, 2020; Muhuro & Kangiete, 2021). However, in South Africa educational landscape, there are some uncertainties about the future, due to variety of challenges associated with distorted culture the time for change management in terms of freeze and unfreeze approach is minimal (Lewin's, 2019; Budiharso & Tarman, 2020). In higher education the still growing academic institutions continue to experience exclusion because of socio-economic context assumed in the post-COVID-19. Due to drastic change of government pursued policies and hurried changes in resource appropriation, task assignments and adaptation in various forms institutionally have been a great hindrance in post COVID-19 pandemic (Kort & Chipunza, 2020).

However, hybrid work is not possible for all roles, which may have a negative impact on equity, inclusion and diversity efforts (Moreira, 2016). The most difficult challenges that businesses would then face in the hybrid structure is providing a work experience which is equal and equitable for all workers, irrespective of where they are located (Stack, 2021). Business owners who refuse to treat employees fairly will risk reputationally damaging their brand as well as bottom line, their attractiveness to talented employees (Reed, 2022). Some educational institutions are unsurprisingly hesitant to hire new employees on a permanent contract as they deal with post COVID-19 economic insecurity and deteriorating revenues. Even in difficult times, employees should earn a living. Temporary contracts in other nations have the potential to reduce the immense pressure on the economy caused by unemployment (Pyoria, Ojala, Saari & Jarvinen 2017).

3. Importance of Having Sound Organisational Culture in The Post COVID-19 Pandemic
Institutional ranking is used by government, all different industry stakeholders including institution leaders to evaluate higher education institutions' success and failure in the post COVID-19 (Zhou, Huang, Xiao, Huang & Fan, 2020b). However, these rankings fail to consider the issue of how institutions can strengthen policies, practices, and structures which form part of desirable culture and are critical in addressing the post COVID-19 pandemic period challenges. In higher education, the disappearance of COVID-19 brought new ways of doing things because employees in this sector deal with students (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Due to the fading away and removal of restrictions in the post COVID-19 pandemic period, numerous institutions consider hybrid work in which both face-to-face and online work are infused as part of a new culture.

However, the struggle to copy with the new set-up by some staff is a concern (Garg, 2021). Some employees invested vast resources on the pretext that COVID-19 will be there forever, hence may count loss as they return to face-to-face work. Hybrid working is deeply engrained model in many South African academic landscapes, as well as possible deal for many of South Africa's top talent when seeking employment (Kort & Chipunza, 2022). Furthermore, although hybrid work can be viewed as a significant risk, it also represents a significant opportunity for South African academic institutions of all sizes. Notwithstanding the lifting of all lockdown and social distancing restrictions, many academic employees have already invested in remote working technology employment (Kort & Chipunza, 2022; Kabeer, Razavi & Rodgers, 2021). This is yet another reason why working remotely is not likely to disappear from the higher education anytime soon. However, it appears that certain professions in higher education provide more remote employment opportunities than others. The roles with the most hybrid job opportunities in South African higher education are currently lecturers, administration, office and support.

The aftermath of COVID-19 crisis came with some changes, the higher education institutions halted some online meetings and adopt the mixture of online learning and face to face meetings. However, some institutions completely do away with online meetings which compelled all the employees to work physically adhering to their normal working times. The innovative workplace, which now has developed primarily as a result of globalisation, the internet, as well as the evolvement of 4IR technologies, has created a new reality for both organisations and their staff (Kort and Chipunza, 2022). Furthermore, increased virtualisation and digitalisation in the higher education sector, employees becoming frequently connected to their employment even in their off-working hours than in the past and this constitute broad trends towards hybrid working which have emerged as new organisational culture in the new world of work.

4. Implications of The Study

From the perspective of theoretical implications, the study conceptualises organisational culture in the post COVID-19 period hence becomes vital in broadening literature of organisation culture in times of crises. In terms of practical implications, the management of the institutions need to embrace new culture that value broad institutional strategies which include inclusion, diversity and internationalisation. In the current COVID-19 aftermath, higher education institutions should engage in extensive thoughts and preparedness efforts in endeavour to make informed decisions which costless and reasonable. In addition, the management should provide comprehensive capacity building as the new culture demands solid professional development plan in which thorough measurements, such as pedagogical, technical and financial are properly considered. Moreover, management should ensure majority of the academic staff are flexible as the period of post COVID-19 requires employees to be versatile. This equips academic employees with capabilities to withstand pressure in times of crisis like COVID-19 pandemic to employees who have been exposed to remote working almost two years. The management should ensure that hybrid working is applied fairly across different levels of the organisation to avoid having multitudes of unfair discrimination labour court cases. In addition, change requires understanding and attention of the management for the organisation to achieve real benefits and required goals.

Conclusion

Having sound organisational culture is a tremendous opportunity in an organisation especially when is effectively enforced and managed. The study established that although hybrid working has been adopted in South African higher education as the new culture in the post COVID-19 pandemic either directly or indirectly, physical working is dominating in the combination. Hybrid working is a new norm that currently being used by educational institutions to lure talented academic staff. However, it should be exercised with caution as it may be association with inequality and unfairness especially between some supportive staff and academic staff. Not all jobs of supportive staff permit them to work remotely. Work meetings are held both online and physical. The limitation of this study is that it focused on secondary data which lacks empirical scientific assessment of the situation. Therefore, future studies should conduct an empirical study to assess the changes of organisational culture in the post COVID-19 pandemic period.

Conflicts of Interest: There is no conflict on this study.

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