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Ashesi's 360 Approach to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sena Agbodjah Agyepong, Angela Owusu-Ansah and William Ohene Annoh

Abstract: *Following the government directive to close schools in March 2020, a meeting of the academic leadership of Ashesi University devised a 360-degree response to the COVID-19 pandemic with decision making underpinned by simplicity and flexibility. The Admissions Department, supported by Student Life, led the evacuation and safe return home of all students, with students with challenging situations placed in homes the week of the announcement. Concurrently, the Academic Affairs team suspended all regular activities for two weeks, and with the assistance of the Operations and IT teams, developed the operational response plan, piloted the following week. Faculty and Academic Affairs stressed best practices, and in response to Student Life, emphasised the quality of instruction over quantity; rigour and higher-order thinking over the amount of learning. Pursuance of quality assurance was through weekly and clear master plans on teaching. Student Life, Admissions, and Academic Affairs used a devised student activity sheet to provide support to students to mitigate attrition, which was less than 0.2 per cent at the end of the semester. They regularly engaged students in virtual town hall meetings. Parents were included in students' study needs and invited to visit classes. Vendors for the grounds, cafeteria, security and cleaning services have been supported during this period. Most faculty and students have begun to enjoy the online teaching and learning experience with no request for a tuition refund, but rather, high student demand for summer school.*

Keywords: Human capacity, decision making, employment, education, qualitative research

Introduction

Ashesi University, situated in Ghana, is a private, not-for-profit, nationally accredited institution offering professional degrees in computer science, engineering and business administration, all grounded in the liberal arts. Its mission is to educate a new generation of ethical and entrepreneurial leaders in Africa and to cultivate within students critical thinking skills, concern for others and the courage it will take to transform the continent. Ashesi has

1,173 mainly Ghanaian students; 17 per cent from 23 African countries; 48 per cent female; and 43 per cent on scholarship.

Since its inception, and before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, Ashesi operated as a traditional residential campus, with basic technological operating systems: a Learning Management System, a system for student academic record-keeping, and most recently, a teleconferencing tool. To support its community to understand better and navigate these technological tools, the University has an established IT support centre.

Armed with these essential technological tools, the University's executive decided to move teaching and learning online when the COVID-19 pandemic hit Ghana. Ashesi has been hailed as one of the few universities on the continent to transition to online education successfully (Tamrat & Teferra 2020). This account of Ashesi's response plan will present a summary of the Government of Ghana (GoG) directive to provide some context, juxtapose Ashesi's response plan to three theories on pandemic management and report on the successes, challenges and lessons learned.

National Response Plan

On the 12th of March 2020, the day Ghana recorded its first two COVID-19 cases, Ghana's President described the pandemic as an 'all Ghanaian matter' and implemented a coordinated response with stakeholders including political, religious, traditional and civil society leaders (Ayei 2020). The GoG's response to reduce the spread of the virus involved banning all public gatherings and closing schools.

Education-related protocols affected approximately 9.2 million learners from kindergarten to senior high schools (K-12), and over 500,000 tertiary learners. The disrupted academic calendars have led to the need for psycho-social support for students studying from home, especially, marginalised students (Ministry of Education, Ghana 2020). The President's directives for school closure made provision for rolling out distance learning programmes via radio and a 24-hour dedicated, free-to-air broadcast channel for the K-12 levels.

Ashesi's Response Plan

Overall Strategy

Ashesi's response can be described as a proactive and strategically planned response, though details developed as the plan unfolded. On the 12th of March, when the President of Ghana described the pandemic as a national security issue, the University's Executive Committee (ExCo) moved into planning mode to prepare for potential school closure.

The ExCo's immediate response reflects the Copenhagen School's securitisation theory (Buzan, Weaver & de Wilde 1998). The securitisation theory propounds that an issue becoming a security issue is a matter of construction, as 'the utterance is the primary reality'

(Buzan et al. 1998: 55). In this case, the utterance by the President of Ghana served as the primary reality for the ExCo. The theory further explains that where a 'threat', which is the pandemic, in this case, is presented as a security threat by a 'securitising actor' defined as 'someone, or a group, who performs the security speech act' (Buzan et al. 1998: 40), the President of Ghana, in this case; there is the acceptance by an audience. The ExCo is the audience in this case. Buzan et al. (1998) further explained that successful securitisation must fulfil both parts, and 'the issue is securitised only if the audience accepts it as such' (p. 25).

Some influential stakeholders of the University thought the ExCo was overreacting by planning to close on-campus operations immediately. The ExCo had however accepted the securitisation of the pandemic by the President, and hence by Friday, March 13, they had detailed a response plan. They additionally identified triggers for setting the response plan into motion. The three primary triggers included: a Ghanaian government directive concerning COVID 19 (directive does not have to be directly associated with higher education to be a trigger); anybody in a nearby community contracting the virus; anybody on the Ashesi campus contracting the virus, i.e. student, staff, faculty or third party vendor.

On that same day, measures that were enacted, such as the Dean of Students calling off the University's Student Council Week scheduled to take place the following week, banning all international travel of Ashesi community members, and others, allowed Ashesi to prepare in advance, for the execution of its plan.

On Sunday, March 15th, the newspapers reported two students in a nearby community with the virus and the ExCo immediately activated the response plan by halting all campus activities and communicating an interim operational plan to the community. That same evening, the President of Ghana announced a ban on all public gatherings and mandated all educational institutions to shut down on-campus operations and adopt online modes of teaching and learning until further notice. The occurrence of the triggers within a couple of days of planning and the reaction of the ExCo again reflected the securitisation theory.

Evacuation of students from campus was the priority. On Monday, March 16th most local students began to leave campus, with travel arrangements made for international students and other socio-economically challenged local students. In some instances, Ashesi rented accommodation for students whose homes were not conducive to studying.

Preparation of faculty for online teaching occurred during the evacuation period. There was a two-week pause on all teaching and learning and other campus operations. The first week focused on investigating the possibilities for teaching and learning online and training faculty on how to use various instructional technology. In the second week, faculty piloted online classes to fine-tune skills, ask questions and adapt their course content to the online tools available. At the end of the second week, classes transitioned fully online, and teaching and learning resumed.

The academics team restructured the semester. The semester was divided into two main parts to take into account teaching and learning in the two different contexts; different modes of

instruction; and the numerous locations and time zones. The period before the pause on campus was Segment A, while the online was Segment B. For the sake of equity to students and faculty, Segment A and Segment B were separate but parts of the same semester. Students could defer Segment B if they did not have access to the internet in their home locations or had other challenges.

Different operational support units strategised and transitioned to remote digital tools to facilitate online instruction. A 24/7 hotline team, among other administrative and academic support units, was established to supplement the University's Support Centre. The hotline team provided around the clock support to faculty to navigate the online tools and transition course content online. It also served as a resource for students who were also new to online learning.

Leadership in Executing the Strategy

The evidence of leadership shown through the actions and inactions of the ExCo fall under three leadership approaches. This triad comprises equally prominent leadership theories which together, produces effective management during disease outbreak (Arifah, Tariq, Rosliza & Juni 2018). They are contingency theory, participative leadership, and transformational leadership.

Ashesi's leadership has traditionally followed the contingency theory of leadership. This theory propounds that the optimal course of action is contingent upon the internal and external situation (Volberda, van der Weerdt, Verwaal, Stienstra & Verdu 2012). When the pandemic hit, our University President was on sabbatical, and the existing internal and external situation caused the ExCo to maximise each other's strengths and to take turns to lead the University to safety. Participative Leadership was also evident among the ExCo's which according to Bhatti et al. (2019) has an impact on citizenship behaviour and plays a crucial role in building trust and commitment in work colleagues. The leadership of Academic Affairs appealed to faculty who agreed to collate and share among themselves their various know-how in online technology to serve as a community of peer-mentors. Odoardi, Battistelli, Montani and Peiró (2019) further note that participative leadership provides an opportunity for employees to share creative ideas, offer helpful solutions to issues and be accountable for its implementation. One such innovative solution implemented was done during student evacuation. The Cameroonian border was closed at the time. The University liaised with the Cameroonian embassy to provide Cameroonian host families for affected students and support these families to care for the students.

According to Bush and Glover (2003), participative leadership is a collective action, and its success depends on the commonality in vision and deeds. Ashesi's vision was simply safety and quality learning, with its success dependent on the community working as one. The response plan was co-developed by the ExCo and academic and administrative heads of departments. The ExCo raised issues in round-table meeting settings, and decisions

collectively made. The ExCo together with departmental teams and leaders proposed iterations of the solutions and conclusions.

Another type of leadership evidenced in this strategy implementation was Transformational Leadership. Transformational leaders lead by example and work towards increasing optimism, enthusiasm and attention of followers (Alqatawenah 2018). According to Conger (2002), transformational leadership allows leaders to positively influence employees and other stakeholders to achieve more than expected, going beyond incentives for performance to transform their concerns into an essential part of the organisation's mission. The University provided internet data individually to approximately 1,200 students and 120 faculty and staff. The Academic Affairs team encouraged faculty per department to submit detailed plans of their teaching each week so the hotline could prepare for specific tools; students could manage their week of connectivity and learning; and faculty could be transparent about quality assurance.

Additionally, to maintain cohesiveness and optimism, the Academic Affairs and Student Life teams communicated each day of the working week with the various mobile chat groups created with students and a staff member, to provide additional support. The two departments also held town hall meetings with each class of students to assess and improve online teaching. Faculty and Academic Affairs stressed best practices, and in response to Student Life, emphasised the quality of instruction over quantity; rigour and higher-order thinking over a reduction in learning.

Looking Within: Successes and Shortfalls

Ashesi's stakeholders received this collaborative 360 response plan to the pandemic well. Students described the response plan as quick and collaborative. Student leaders were instrumental in its conceptualisation, and students attested to their voices being heard. Online office hours, mobile message applications, and other technological solutions made faculty more accessible to students and increased the levels of engagement. Faculty and staff appreciated the regular team and individual meetings because the constant communication allowed for rapid remedial actions. It also provided the necessary support in the uncertainty and adaptation to remote work. Resources made available to staff and faculty members guided them through the transition and helped them implement various aspects of their workflow. For faculty, FAQs provided at different key operational points of their role such as upload processes and grade submission, Segment A and B explanations and its effects on teaching and learning, among other interventions guided them on critical remote and online tasks.

The hotline team developed a database of students, their parents and guardians contacts, as well as a weekly student inactivity tracker to monitor student engagement. The tracker highlighted students who were missing classes, not submitting assignments, experiencing psycho-social challenges, among other challenges, and escalated to the right support offices.

The success of this inactivity tracker was very instrumental in reducing attrition and the number of students who initially opted for deferment. Students who appeared on the inactivity list were contacted individually (via phone and email). For academically at-risk students, the Provost, Academic Registry, Academic Advisor or Counselling & Coaching team scheduled meetings with them weekly, and most became academically successful. Additionally, the University provided laptops for students who needed them; stipends to support the upkeep of scholarship students at home; and deferred payments in tuition arrears for financially challenged students. These were in a bid to ensure that no student was left behind due to their socio-economic conditions.

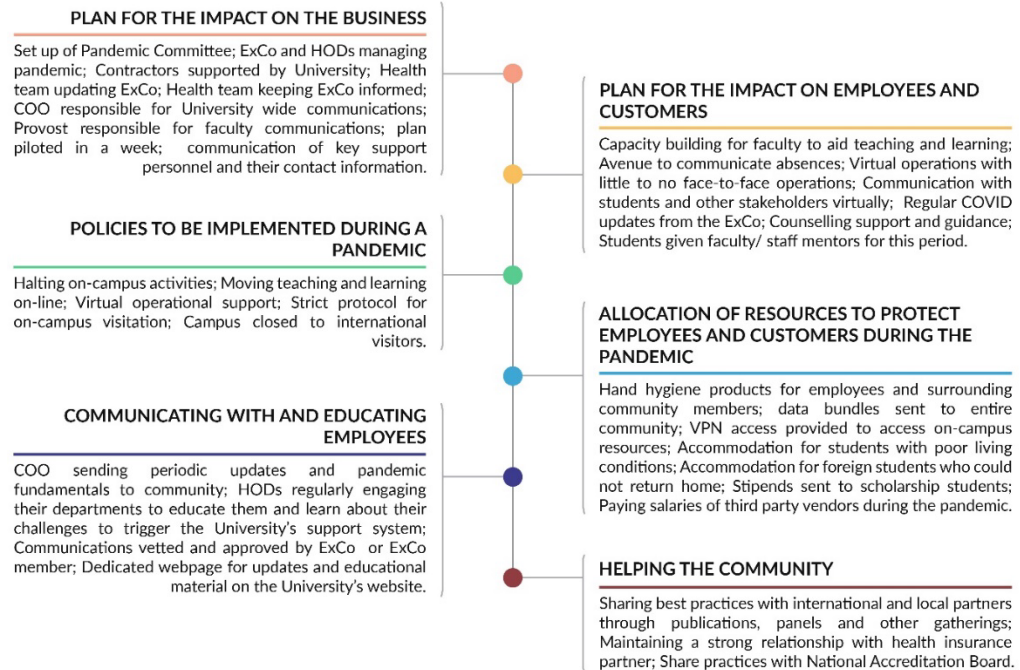
All third-party service contractors, i.e. landscaping, canteen operators, and the likes, were supported by matching a proportion of their employee salaries. They suffered no income reductions or layoffs (External Relations Office 2020). Instead, they underwent COVID-19 prevention training and are currently maintaining the campus. The maintenance of staff and faculty incentives such as medical health insurance, transport allowance and paid medical leave further promote Ashesi's values of citizenship.

This strategy was not without shortfalls. Mobile data were critical to access learning and administrative materials to teach, learn and perform general administration duties. Mobile data distributed to students, often did not get to students promptly. Time zone differences also made it relatively complicated to sync classes. Most students in different time zones had to resort to viewing pre-recorded class sessions and scheduling one-on-one office hours with faculty at mutually convenient times.

Conclusion

The Ashesi response and management plan to the COVID pandemic brings to the fore the appropriateness of the Copenhagen securitisation theory and the Arifah et al. (2018) framework of participative leadership theory, contingency theory and the transformational leadership theory, as the analytical lenses in the management of disease outbreak.

Additionally, the response and management plan aligned with the checklist adapted from a disaster-preparedness framework designed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC 2016). The major items on the checklist include a plan for the impact on the business; a plan for the impact on employees and customers; policies to be implemented during a pandemic; allocation of resources to protect employees and customers during the pandemic; communicating with and educating employees; and helping the community. The checklist provides a 360-approach to responding to pandemics. Figure 1 shows how it aligns with Ashesi's response plan.

Figure 1: Ashesi's Preparedness for the COVID-19 Pandemic

A significant concern for most universities at this time is the quality and rigour of learning. The impact or outcome of the 360-approach, in the era of disruption, includes an increased graduation rate for the Ashesi Class of 2020. Another change noticed was an increase in Summer School 2020 enrolment which was online. Ashesi has experienced the University's highest traction rate yet, with a 19 per cent increase in enrolment numbers from 2019. Students and faculty who were panicked by the idea of online teaching and learning generally seem to have adjusted well to online instruction and conversations about the future of education at Ashesi are ongoing. The ExCo has decided to continue the Fall 2020 academic semester online. The 360-approach, where everyone in the institution is included and supported by management, results in sustainable success in responding to and managing pandemics.

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