

HANDS-ON ARTICLES

TWO PANDEMICS, ONE HUNDRED YEARS AND THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA: A BRIEF COMPARISON

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Abstract

The effects of the Covid 19 pandemic on higher education in South Africa and the University of Pretoria inspired this brief investigation into how the university responded to the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918. This article looks at some of the traces of the effects of the Spanish Flu found in the University of Pretoria Archives. These include, apart from official documents, a handful of student reminiscences of the times which give some insights into how students in particular experienced the epidemic. These will be contrasted to personal impressions of how Covid 19 has impacted the 2020 class at the University of Pretoria. This brief comparison points to the far reaching impact the current pandemic has had on the university and higher education more generally.

Keywords: University history; pandemics; higher education; Spanish Flu; Covid 19; University of Pretoria.

The outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic and the closing of university campuses across South Africa has had a far-reaching impact on both the students and staff of these institutions, the full repercussions of which we are only beginning to imagine. In witnessing the effects of the suspension of contact classes and the return of students to their homes at the University of Pretoria (UP), I began to wonder about how the University had coped with the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918 and what impact this epidemic had had on the institution. This took me into the archives and into the official record of the University's history.

Just over one hundred years ago, an international pandemic also led to the closure of the University, which was then still operating as the Transvaal University College (TUC). The Spanish Flu epidemic reached South Africa in September 1918 and the following month became known locally as Black October as infections and deaths skyrocketed. Although the effects of this catastrophic epidemic had effectually ebbed by November 1918,

the University still felt its impact among its student and staff population.¹

What is interesting is that while the Spanish Flu was swift and deadly in its spread, the impact in terms of time was quite different from the experience that we have been living through with Covid 19. On the one hand, the flu epidemic also led to an extension of executive powers to cope with the crisis. At the TUC this is seen in a decision taken by the Council of the College in October 1918 which “[i]n view of the prevailing epidemic” gave the Rector power to make “such emergency expenditure as ... [he] might consider necessary”.² On the other hand, the effects of the Spanish Flu epidemic had only a short-term effect on the actual running of the College. A decision was taken to end the academic year early and exams were postponed until the beginning of 1919. It appears that after the summer holiday, activities resumed on campus. This meant a disruption of only a few months towards the end of the academic year. This is quite a contrast to the disruption of most contact classes and normal campus activities for three quarters of the academic year in 2020. The effects of the Spanish Flu are also only mentioned in the most fleeting terms in the first volume of the University’s official history *Ad Destinatum I* and this only with reference to the simmering language question at the TUC at the time. According to the author, the atmosphere at the TUC was quite tense between English and Afrikaans speaking students at the end of 1918 in the wake of the First World War. He suspects that had the College not closed early due to the Spanish Flu epidemic, this tension may have boiled over on the campus. In fact, this tension did come to the surface the following year when students burned a British flag on the College campus.³

Despite the only brief allusions in the official record to the effects of the Spanish Flu, a collection of student reminiscences housed in the UP Archives includes some recollections of this era which open a window on how the epidemic affected the student body. One student remembered:

But in the year 1918 the whole world fell under the Spanish Flu and the population of Pretoria was also affected. By the Summer of 1918 the situation was so bad, that it was impossible to continue with classes. Numerous students were affected, but, as far as I know, no residence students died, although many were seriously ill. Groups of students, which were not yet infected, joined teams of volunteers which undertook visits to

1 H Phillips, “‘Black October’: The impact of the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918 on South Africa”, (DPhil, UCT, 1984), pp. 1, 8.

2 University of Pretoria Archives (UPA), Minutes of the University Council, B-5-1-1, 17 October 1918.

3 CH Rautenbach (ed), *Ad Destinatum. Gedenkboek van die Universiteit van Pretoria* (Johannesburg, Voortrekkerpers Ltd, 1960), p. 52.

mainly the poor areas of the town, to try and help people affected by the plague. Doctors and nurses were insufficient, but in any case, there was very little that could be done against such a plague, except to provide food (usually soup) and to try help in emergency cases. Those who were ill were advised to lie still and under no circumstances to try to wash or bath. I remember that so many people died that the horses which drew the hearses had to jog to the cemetery. Among students who still remained behind in the residences there was a general spirit of fatalism. You had to wait and see what was going to happen with you.

I remember that one night a group of students gathered together in the house “Glory Hole”. There was a feeling to lift the heaviness a little and a number of bottles of beer were acquired to help with this. Mr. Otten, a large man with a round face, who also wore glasses, played on his guitar and the other men sang together with him. It all helped to relieve the tension.⁴

The later well-known Afrikaans poet, Duke Erlank or Eitemal, was also a student in 1918. He commented that the exams of 1918 were postponed until the beginning of 1919 due to the epidemic. At the time the medium of instruction at the College was English. He and a few other students had requested to take Chemistry in Afrikaans and in response the Chemistry professor, DF du Toit Malherbe had challenged them to answer the exam in Afrikaans and had given them a book of Dutch terms to help with their preparation. Erlank remarked that epidemic gave him an advantage as the postponement of the exam meant that he had extra time to bring his Afrikaans Chemistry up to standard.⁵

He also remembered a fellow student who contracted the flu at this time. This student, John Quin (later Director of Veterinary Services and Dean of the Faculty of Veterinary Science), had taken Erlank under his wing as a first-year student in 1918. Erlank remembers:

During the flu of 1918 John Quin quickly became sick. I often took care of him. The flu germs apparently did not find an entrance to my skinniness. One day I came into his room. He was sitting in his bed, and was pouring from a very suspicious bottle into a teaspoon something that he —grrrr! gnashed between his teeth. I asked him what it was. “No, old Lammetjie, the matron, Mrs Lindeque, said that I must use Epsom salts to clean my stomach.” My teeth went on edge and I asked, “But John, isn’t the stuff

4 UPA, Ad Destinatum Herrinerige, Briefwisseling met oudstudente en ander instansies, D-6-5-1-6-22: Letter, AR Pullen (Alumnus)/B Cilliers (Die sekretaris Halfeusfees Herdenkingskomitee), 14 April 1980.

5 UPA, Tuks Alumni Herrinnerige: A-Z, D-6-5-1-6-22: Letter: D Erlank (Alumnus)/B Cilliers (Director: Bureau for Public Relations), 1 April 1979.

really bad?” “Yes, old Lammetjie, but what can one do?”

Classes resumed in 1919, although student numbers decreased slightly from the previous year. There were 325 students enrolled in 1918 and only 300 in 1919. In June 1919, the Afrikaans editor of *The TUC Student Magazine* commented on the student population at the end of his editorial as follows:⁶

There are again young forces which have joined us, a number of new students. We wish them a warm welcome. There are also old forces which have disappeared from the scene; among them are those who due to illness—the results of the terrible epidemic—had to leave. A rapid recovery we wish to them all.

2020 by contrast has held some different experiences for the student body of the University of Pretoria. Instead of the mere postponement of an exam period, classes were cancelled mid-way through the first semester of the year and, for the majority of students, contact classes were suspended for the remainder of the year. This has meant an almost nine-month period in which academic pursuits have continued but in a completely altered state and in which lecture halls and campuses have been virtually empty of student life. There is also some concern regarding how the pandemic will affect higher education in the long term and what the “new normal” of the future at a university will look like.

Also contrary to the experience of 1918 where students were encouraged to assist and even volunteered to nurse the victims of the Spanish Flu epidemic, 2020 has been a year of social distancing and isolation for many students. In a brief survey conducted for one of my classes it was striking how many students commented on how much they missed spending time with their friends and the social life that is usually part and parcel of the student experience.

The shift to online learning also meant that students who had registered for contact education suddenly became distance learners. For some this was a positive change. Some of my students spoke of completing their classwork while in their pajamas in bed. Others noted that as they had nothing else to do their academic performance skyrocketed. But there were also many who through the year battled severe mental health challenges including anxiety and depression, while others suffered from lack of motivation and procrastination without the constraints and safeguard of a regular class and

6 G Dekker, “Editoriaal”, *Studenteblad van die T.U.K.*, 3(5), June 1919, p. 2.

campus routine. Many students have also struggled with less than ideal learning environments. Underlying much of the contact that I have had with students has been a sense of bewilderment and a feeling of not being sufficiently prepared for the sudden and sometimes drastic change in their academic year.

Perhaps the reminiscences of the students of 1918 were coloured by the passage of time and many could look back and dwell on the more absurd or lighter moments of life during the Spanish Flu. Certainly, the actual academic pursuits of the University did not seem to undergo many changes. In contrast, perhaps due our better understanding of how viruses spread and the constant monitoring of the pandemic, university pursuits have experienced staggering changes in 2020. It will be interesting to look back in half a century and consider the effect of the Covid 19 experience on university life in the long term. At the moment, while we are still in the thick of thing, one can only wonder and speculate.