

Kwasa Newsletter No.7 December 2020

(From The West Green Charitable Trust @ 11th December 2020)



Covid-19

2020 - where to start?

Hello to Kwasa's supporters in the UK. One of the few benefits of Lockdowns and Tiers is the luxury of time to give an update on Kwasa's progress during a very strange and stressful year.

Despite everything, Sharron and Kwasa have come through the year having coped very well - students and staff all. Our planned visit to the school in April fell by the wayside, so we have kept in touch via Zoom, voice calls and e-mails.

South Africa - in the context of Covid-19

In line with much of Europe, South Africa reported it's first case of Covid-19 in early March 2020. The country went into a strict national lockdown on 27th March.

All schools closed on 18th March, reopening in early June. As infections rose again, all schools closed again for 4 weeks from 27th July to 24th August.

At December 2020, there have been 800,000 reported cases cumulatively, 5 million tests, and 22,200 deaths. It is widely reported that the actual levels of infection and death are under-reported due to poor record keeping and low levels of testing in the townships and informal settlements.

South African GDP shrank 51% in the 3 months to June 2020. Unemployment in the same period rose to 42% of the working age population, with a loss of 2.3 million jobs. 3 million people who had jobs in February 2020 were not working in June 2020. Vulnerable groups (lower income, lower levels of education) were disproportionately affected. Distress grants for the unemployed (£16 per month) were introduced by the Government in May, funded by a loan from the IMF.

Although South African citizens feature in at least two of the current worldwide Covid vaccine trials, the SA Ministry of Health announced on 5th December that it will 'probably take delivery of its first delivery of coronavirus vaccines in the middle of 2021' sufficient for about 10% of the

population; and only possible after a donation from the Solidarity Fund, a charitable organisation seeking to augment the SA Government response to Covid.

As an example of the current challenges and their impact in Daggafontein (and on the school) a 50m section of Kwasa's security fencing was stolen in June, despite 24 hour guarding on the school site. It was recovered the next day from one of the properties in the settlement, and re-fixed.



Kwasa College's and Sharron's response

During the initial school closure, Sharron's first concern was for the community living in and around the informal settlement of Daggafontein, and whether they would be able to survive under lockdown and curfew, and with little or no paid work. In the weeks following the first lockdown, she established a food bank on the school site. With food donated by local businesses, local shops, suppliers and the local community, she provided fortnightly food bags for 240 families.



During lockdown, Kwasa staff prepared and distributed work packs to students in the settlement. Absence of internet and technology meant remote teaching was not possible.

In the weeks leading to the return to school in early June, a Covid plan was devised:

- A walk through sanitiser/disinfectant misting unit, for all students, staff and visitors.
- All students and classrooms supplied with their own hand sanitisers.
- All students supplied with two re-usable face-masks daily - one for use from home to minibus or school gate (and return), one for use within school, to be worn in class and when moving about the school. Students, staff and visitors temperature checked upon arrival.
- Full use of both school minibuses to reduce 'load' numbers.

- All face-masks returned to school and laundered weekly.
- Primary classes halved in size, and a two week curriculum introduced so that students experienced a full week's education over a fortnight.
- Classrooms and walkways marked to ensure social distancing in line with Government rules.
- Delaying the Pre-school children's return.
- Staff training for all teaching and support staff.



Grade 7 students returned to school on 8th June, and all other Primary grades had returned by 29th June. The Pre-school returned on the 6th July.



On 27th July, two staff tested positive for Covid and the senior team closed the school for a two week isolation and cleansing period.

When we next spoke to Sharron in early October, all students were in school, albeit on the same fortnightly curriculum/attendance schedule, and the school had passed a Department of Social Development inspection of Covid preparedness.

Student attendance since return has been strong, with more than 95% attendance in all year groups. Thankfully, since the July outbreak, no further cases have been recorded for students or staff, which is fairly incredible given the crowded living conditions for most students and some staff in the informal settlement.

Kwasa broke for the long 'summer' holiday on 11th December, and will return on 27th January.

Impact on Kwasa finances

Kwasa's sustainable financial model is that school fees contribute 33% of income (school fees for Primary Grade students are R550 a month, or R6,600 (£330) a year). The remainder of income arises from Government grants (41%), and Donations (26%). Covid changes all that.

For the past 10 years we have operated a bursary scheme whereby UK individuals and companies can pay the school fees of a student whose parents, carers or child-headed family could not afford to pay. Pre-Covid, 30 sponsorships were in place covering the the fees for 53 Kwasa students each year .

These are extraordinary times. The unemployment resulting from Covid 19 has impacted the number of students whose fees are now in arrears and we expect this challenge to continue into and beyond 2021. In conversations with Sharron, we agreed to try to expand the UK sponsorship scheme to help her bridge this gap in her finances, and to give the parents and carers most in need the help they need to send their children to school. Amazingly, a further 35 student's fees have been funded, bringing to 88 the total of bursaries. I would like to thank the parishioners of Holy Trinity St. Mary, Guildford and our friends of West Green Trust for rising to this challenge.

Other news!

Grade 7's graduate

The original pre-Primary class who joined Kwasa in 2011 graduated as Grade 7's this week, and are looking forward to High School in January. Of the 22 students, 18 have been offered places, with several progressing to Springs Girls High and Springs Boys High under scholarship, and other moving to Springs Technical Boys, and Nigel High School. Sharron is confident the remaining 4 students will be offered places by Gauteng Education Department shortly. Where necessary, Kwasa will pay for books, sports equipment and fees charged by these schools.

Looking forward to January 2021, Kwasa's enrolled student numbers are healthy:

Grade	Capacity	Enrolled
Pre-Primary	124	124
Grade 1	30	34
Grade 2	30	32
Grade 3	30	33

Grade 4	30	33
Grade 5	30	46
Grade 6	30	30
Grade 7	30	24
Total	364	389

New Head of Pre-Primary

Following the retirement of Gill Edgar, Sonja van Loggerenberg was appointed head of the Pre-Primary school for January 2020. Sonja is a qualified teacher, and has taught in the school at Grade 3 and Pre-Primary level. She is hugely enthusiastic about developing the Reggio approach to child led learning, and despite Covid has made significant progress with this in 2020.

The White Building

Regular readers of these newsletters will recall the 7 year saga of the White Building, and the ambitious plan for its transformation,

from this...

to this...



With funding over several years from this Trust (and three UK families particularly) and Federated Employer's Mutual Assurance of South Africa, the work was finally completed in August 2020, early and under budget. Ironically, Covid aided progress, with the building team moving in to live in the the complex during lockdown, enabling them to continue to work and earn undisturbed by events in the outside world.

The last stages of work on the Hall, with a new concrete hall floor, a sprung wooden stage, glazed external doors, and a sound and light system, have resulted in a high quality space which will enable Kwasa to:

- meet as a whole school
- showcase the performing talents of the students, and
- generate a rental stream through external letting of the hall (the largest such space in Springs) to community groups and other schools and churches.

In addition, the old White Building complex, which once housed 220 informal squatters, now accommodates:

- a new entrance to the school, foyer, reception space and offices for bursar and visitor activities.
- a Clinic, comprising waiting area, consulting room and washroom/toilet.



- IT/Media room, complete with 24 new computers and work spaces.
- boys and girls student toilet blocks, for Hall users

An added bonus was the installation of a (safe) new steel staircase to Sharron and Owen's first floor offices.



A retired Senior District Nurse is working part time, pro-bono from the Clinic, treating minor wounds, issuing Retrovirals, and performing vaccinations for pupils and staff. Over time, Sharron hopes to persuade one of the town GP Practices to provide a doctor to also work part-time from the Clinic, and to open the Clinic to the wider community.

The school held a small celebration on 23rd October to thank those who had made this transformation possible, with a (socially distanced) performance by the Kwasa pupil choir.

2 new classrooms and an Art Room

The start of the 2020 school year saw the Grade 7's move into one of the new classrooms, and a further one brought into use as a space for one-to-one supported learning. With advent of Covid and social distancing, the 'spare' classroom is fully in use to enable smaller class groups to be taught.

In March, just as Covid hit, the new Art Room (with funding raised by the students of St Peters College, Johannesburg) was also completed and immediately brought into use as a teaching space. An opening of both new buildings by the Bishop of Highveld was planned for the 22nd March but cancelled!

Daggafontein Mega City

I reported in the last newsletter the imminent plans for 17,500 homes to be built on the land bordering three sides of Kwasa's 20 hectare site. There has not been much progress in the year; as result of corruption in the tendering process the first building works packages are being re-tendered. Watch this space!

Looking forward to 2021

The Kwasa Board anticipate the current Covid challenges will continue well into 2021. In addition, the challenge of attracting, rewarding and retaining skilled, newly trained teachers remains, and is a priority for the school going forward.

Where feasible, the Board will continue to look for funding opportunities which will enable Kwasa's infrastructure to grow to accommodate more flexible teaching spaces and future school growth.

Initial hopes to be able to move to 2 form entry, partly through a subsidy funding model for fees where the better off paying higher fees would subsidise those less well off, has been deferred until the economic picture improves.

South African inflation has been running at 4-7% annually over the last five years; reluctantly, the Kwasa Board have agreed to raise fees, for Pre-Primary students, from R330/£17 to R450/£23, and for Primary students, from R550/£28 to R700/£35 per month.

We really hope to visit Kwasa in the summer, to hear directly from Sharron and her team the challenges she faces, and to work with her to address as many of these as we can.

Finally, thank you!

All of this has been made possible by the passion and drive of Sharron and her Board of Trustees, and by the unflagging support of all of you. Every pound you donate through West Green charity goes to Kwasa - we have no salaries, administrative or other costs. Thank you!

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