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Abstract
This article examines the challenges and uncertainties that the African higher education sector is experiencing due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, and some of the responses so far.

COVID-19 Threat to Higher Education: Africa's Challenges, Responses, and Apprehensions

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The onset of the coronavirus pandemic became primetime news in Africa as the plight of its international students in Wuhan, China—where it began—took center stage. At the time of the outbreak, Hubei, the province where Wuhan is located, hosted around 5,000 of the nearly 82,000 African students in China.

In the early days of the crisis, concerns in the Global North focused primarily on the disruption that the pandemic would bring to student flows from China and its economic impact on their higher education systems. Efforts to prevent the spread of the virus ranged from extending or postponing academic terms to banning incoming students.

Most of Africa's initial response focused on repatriating students stranded in Wuhan or providing assistance from afar. Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, as well as Algeria and its North African neighbors, succeeded in repatriating their students—an achievement that was much celebrated. Other countries lacking the readiness and the resources to do the same had to assume a low profile against public opinion, which favored repatriation.

Responses

Africa has taken the coronavirus pandemic seriously only in the last few weeks, following the confirmation of its first cases. Initial responses included the closure of schools and universities beginning mid-March. Increasingly, universities across the continent are setting up institution-wide task forces to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Some are striving to participate in high-end research toward finding a cure for the virus. Many are attempting to shift to online teaching and learning through institutional, national, continental, and international initiatives.

Most plans are only at their initial stages of implementation and call for ramping up current efforts, forging wider cooperation, and sharing experiences and resources across the whole continent. Two major issues that hold serious implications in the fight against the pandemic are online teaching, which is now championed as an alternative form of educational delivery, and the economic impact of the pandemic on African higher education

Online Delivery

According to UNESCO, 9.8 million African students are experiencing disruption in their studies due to the closure of higher education institutions. The danger of contamination has triggered institutions to move their courses online. However, going online is not that simple on a continent where only 24 percent of the population has access to the Internet,

and poor connectivity, exorbitant costs, and frequent power interruptions are serious challenges.

Increasingly, universities are partnering with internet providers and governments to overcome this critical challenge by negotiating zero-rated access to specific educational and information websites, as in the case of Rwanda, South Africa, and Tunisia. At the institutional level, a number of universities, such as the public University of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa, and private universities such as Ashesi University in Ghana, are offering data bundles to their students and staff. Going digital effectively requires substantial coordination with, and swift support from, institutional and national service providers, regional entities, international partners, NGOs, the private sector, and ICT providers to rally behind such tools and platforms at little or no cost.

It is imperative to seriously seek alternative means and approaches, in order not to leave behind students with little or no access to electronic communication. The painful reality of the digital divide on the continent has to be strategically and systematically managed: reaching out to millions of marginalized students must become a national priority in this time of crisis.

While this is taking shape, institutions need to develop a comprehensive plan and a rigorous follow-up scheme to ensure that academics and students make proper use of digital platforms. This task cannot be left solely to the discretion of individual actors.

Impact on Economy and Higher Education
Prolonged civil wars, Africa's economic downturn in the 1970s, structural adjustment programs in the 1980s, and the debacle of the flawed rate-of-return discourse are just a few of the challenges that have impacted higher education in Africa. In the last decade, though, many economies have been booming. Half of the fastest growing economies on the globe are currently located on the continent. Africa's growth performance (3.4 percent in 2019) was expected to increase to 3.9 percent in 2020. With an average of 5 percent of national GDP dedicated to education (one of the largest globally), the African region was beginning to witness a revitalization of its higher education sector prior to the onset of the crisis.

Most of Africa's 54 countries now have confirmed cases and fatalities due to COVID-19. Many have closed their borders and banned international flights. Trade is declining at an alarming rate. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, South Africa, and Tunisia have announced complete lockdowns. Recent economic forecasts show that Africa's economy could experience a loss of between US$90 billion and 200 billion in 2020, with the GDP shrinking by three to eight points. In South Africa, growth is expected to contract by 1.5 percent in the first two months of the outbreak due to its effect on key economic sectors such as mining and tourism. Ethiopia's recent request for assistance on behalf of the African nations to the G–20 forum, for a US$150 billion emergency financing, the freezing of interest rates on loans, and the cancellation of debts, is an indication of the massive threat to the continent's economies.

Apprehensions and Opportunities
The continent's meager institutional and national capacities, weak healthcare systems, and gregarious way of life may prove catastrophic should the virus continue to spread at the same rate and intensity as in other critically affected countries. The impact of such a calamitous scenario is easy to imagine and frightening to predict.

The effects of the pandemic on Africa's nearly 2,000 higher education institutions cannot be overemphasized. If the crisis persists, it may seriously impact the commitment of governments toward higher education in the face of competing demands from the healthcare, business, and other priority sectors serving vulnerable segments of society. Further, global support to higher education, research collaborations, and partnership schemes, most often directed at critical areas such as strengthening PhD programs, could be massively scaled back.

African higher education institutions are expected to do more in the months ahead, while concurrently battling across many fronts. This includes addressing the more immediate challenges of the threat of COVID-19, seeking improved mechanisms for online delivery, and planning to address the long-term effects of the pandemic on institutional

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capacity. In the aftermath of the pandemic, cost recovery through financial contribution from beneficiaries in the form of fees or loan repayments will not be easy, since economies will have seriously declined—if they indeed survive a total collapse. The expansion of public universities will be abruptly frozen. Private providers, which are dependent on tuition and fees, will also be hard hit, with many facing downsizing or even closure, as they receive little or no support from governments.

On a positive note, this threat—and the approaches to overcome it—may be catalytic for long-lasting changes in African higher education. Among others, diversified means of educational delivery, in particular a nonresidential model, may become more mainstream, more acceptable, and more respectable. ◢