

Abstract

COVID-19 will have serious consequences for the higher education sector in Africa. It will give rise to inequities resulting from the use of ICT, affect the quality of teaching and learning, jeopardize research funding, exacerbate graduate unemployment, and place private institutions at risk. Urgent action is needed at the level of each country for readiness when the crisis is over, otherwise recovery of the sector may be too slow, too late.

COVID-19: What Consequences for Higher Education in Africa?

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C OVID-19 will leave no sector in any country in the world unaffected, and its consequences will be felt for years to come. At a time when huge efforts were being deployed to transform and improve higher education in Africa, there is a danger that COVID-19 will destabilize the sector, with serious consequences. This article highlights some of these consequences, to enable leaders of higher education institutions, policy makers, and other stakeholders to reflect on them and be better prepared to address them.

Inequities

As part of their lockdown measures to contain the spread of the virus, African countries have had no choice but to close their higher education institutions (HEIs). And HEIs have had no option but to have recourse to the use of information and communications technology (ICT) to deliver their programs online at a distance from their enrolled students. But the process has laid bare the digital divide within the African continent: between those countries that have better ICT infrastructure and the others; between HEIs within the same country, with some being far better equipped and experienced than others; and between students within the same institution—the rich who live in urban areas and the poor in rural areas, who can barely afford to access the Internet, when and if it is available.

It is true that the crisis has provided an opportunity for all HEIs to quickly improve and maximize their ICT operations. However, the majority do not have the capacity to fully deliver whole programs online. It is the few open universities in Africa that have that capacity, but their targets are mostly mature students, those in employment, and those wishing to upgrade their qualifications, not fresh school-leavers. While a significant number of African HEIs have been implementing blended learning (a mixture of face-to-face and online learning) in order to increase access and improve learning, hardly any had intended for their face-to-face delivery to be completely replaced. How then can African countries and HEIs deal with the inequities arising from the wide use of online learning, even for a relatively short period?

Quality

It is a fallacy to believe that online learning can be effective by merely posting a lecturer's notes online or having a video recording of the lecture. Yet, this is what is generally happening at present. Experience has shown that for online learning to be of any

quality, teaching materials must be prepared by professional instructional designers, lecturers must be pedagogically trained for delivering the programs, and students must be equally exposed to the pedagogy of online learning. Unprepared online delivery will have an impact on the quality of the programs.

At a time when significant achievements have been made in improving the quality of teaching and learning in African higher education institutions, this is an unfortunate development. The worst affected programs will be science and technology, as students will be unable to access laboratories for their practicals. Yet, science and technology programs are the ones that are most important for Africa's development. How can HEIs find alternative approaches to using laboratories and, subsequently, how can they mitigate the consequences of poor-quality programs as a result of unplanned online delivery?

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Pipeline Effect

Secondary schools, which feed students to HEIs, have also been closed. Already, it had been observed in many African countries that with the high increase in enrollments in secondary schools resulting from measures taken to improve access, the quality of students entering HEIs had deteriorated. The situation will be aggravated with the closure of schools, and HEIs will have to devise measures to cater for a poorer quality of student intake, perhaps by running remedial courses in the first year. Also, end-of-secondary school examinations are being postponed or canceled. What approaches should HEIs adopt in selecting their next cohort of students if examination results are not available? Here, national approaches covering the whole education sector need to be adopted.

Research

In order to improve the research output from Africa—which is known to be the lowest of any region—a plethora of initiatives and projects have been implemented over the past couple of decades, whether at the national, regional, or continental level. The emphasis has been on increasing postgraduate training, especially at the doctoral level, and facilitating research projects in HEIs with an emphasis on areas that are of priority to the development of Africa. And all indicators show that the initiatives are now bearing fruit.

However, the bulk of the research initiatives are funded by European countries, by agencies and foundations in the United States, and lately by China. Also, almost all the research is undertaken in collaboration with HEIs in these countries. As COVID-19 is impacting the whole world, and Europe, the United States, and China appear to be the hardest hit, can Africa continue to rely on research funding from these sources? Several of these countries will probably end up in recession and their HEIs will understandably give priority to redressing their own situation.

How then will research projects already initiated in Africa and funded externally be maintained? To what alternative sources of funding can African HEIs turn to undertake their research?

Graduate Unemployment

Almost every African country has lately been experiencing the challenge of graduate unemployment, and in some countries unemployment figures are alarming. From feedback obtained from employers, a major cause of the unemployment is the lack of “soft skills” in graduates: poor communication skills, lack of personal initiative, inability to work in a team, etc. The wide use of online learning because of COVID-19 will undoubtedly exacerbate the situation, as students will be working on their own. Here is an opportunity to actively involve employers to assist in providing the skills they need.

Unfortunately, for economic reasons, many potential private employers of graduates may be forced to lay off their staff, thus increasing unemployment. This will make it even harder for graduates to find employment. The social and political consequences of large-scale unemployment, especially among the educated youth, can be serious.

Private Higher Education Institutions

A characteristic of the higher education sector in African countries is the presence of private institutions. The number of private institutions is already significantly greater than public ones, and private student enrollment has steadily increased over the years,

with some countries now having almost equal student enrollment in public and private institutions.

These private institutions usually operate along a business model and are heavily dependent on students' fees to cover staff salaries and operational costs. While public institutions may eventually receive assistance from the state to overcome the consequences of COVID-19, the private ones may be forced to stop their operations for lack of funds. Closure of these institutions would have a dramatic impact on the higher education sector and countries' economic development. What are the possible solutions? How can the state assist private institutions at such a time of crisis?

Action

Understandably, at present, African countries, as elsewhere in the world, are prioritizing the health sector to minimize contagion and limit deaths. They are also trying to assist the socially disadvantaged of their population. Economic recovery and support to other sectors of the economy will have to come later. But it is vital for each sector to start reflecting on the impact of COVID-19 and assessing its possible consequences, otherwise recovery of the sector may be too slow, too late.

This applies to the higher education sector as well. The approach must be holistic and involve all stakeholders, including the private sector. Each country should set up a task force on higher education under the leadership of the relevant ministry, to survey the situation, suggest immediate and short-term measures, and be ready to effect redress when the crisis is over. ▲

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