RUFORUM Webinar Series (2020)

Introductory Note for Webinar 11

Date: 16th September 2020

African Universities in Post COVID-19: Assessing the Opportunities and Challenges of On-Line Learning

African universities have been discussing and proposing much greater uptake of on-line learning more than two decades ago, when the first on-line university in Africa was founded. Even as the quality, accessibility and affordability have improved in the past decade, there was still reluctance to adopt on-line learning. Perceived threats to jobs, lack of skills and exposure and traditional perceptions of the role of a lecturer as the best mechanism for knowledge sharing and facilitating learning were some of the factors discouraging uptake. This was compounded by the lack of investment by universities in providing the infrastructure, policies and the training necessary to support blended learning.

The Corona virus, COVID-19, has changed these perceptions. It has revolutionized thinking on the higher education space worldwide. Universities across the continent have been finding ways to keep their students learning despite the closure of campuses. This has, of course, been made very difficult by lack of access to equipment and reliable internet, especially in remote areas. Few universities have established Learning Management Systems, but with the newly available tools (e.g. Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and improved Skype, Google Classroom and Google Hangouts, among others), proving that it is possible for any university lecturer to reach students who have access to a computer and to internet; the paradigm is shifting in favor of more on-line learning while still maintaining some opportunities for physical contact. Where computers are scarce, much can even be achieved with smart phones and WhatsApp. But there remains the issue of the "last mile"; majority of students have no access to internet signal, or no computer or smart phone. These students require more traditional support of distance learning if the university closures are to continue for months. They will need dedicated radio programmes, books and an operational postal service or they will have to be provided with early entry back to college and dedicated catch-up classes before all other students return to campus.

This Webinar is directed at the future of on-line learning at universities in Africa. How has the COVID-19 crisis and the increased access on-line learning tools in response to lock-down affected the situation in Africa? What are the challenges and opportunities for universities? What has changed in the way courses are offered, research projects are continued since the onset of COVID-19 and how? What university policies need to be modified to accommodate this shift? What do we/universities need in terms of policies, regulations, resources from government to ensure greater uptake? What is the view of university administrators, faculty and students and how will they respond? The focus of this discussion is on how we can support university faculty to be more prepared to offer on-line learning as part of their courses and for students to be motivated to take up on-line courses without feeling that they are getting less for what they paid. What do universities need to do to ensure that students are able to benefit? What are some of the benefits and costs of on-line programmes? How could the benefits be realised and the costs be offset? All these are questions that need to be discussed.

Below is the summary of webinar 11:

Main focus: Identifying the key factors that universities need to put in place to strengthen the uptake of on-line learning by the faculty and students

Moderator: **Mr. Rafiq EL ALAMI,** Mohammed VI Polytechnic University, Morocco

Date: 16 September 2020

Time: 14.00-16.00 (East African Standard Time)

Panelists:

1. **Ms. Cristina Petracchi**, Head of eLearning Academy, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
2. **Hon. Peter Ogwang**, Minister of State for Information, Communication Technology and National Guidance
3. **Mr. Mark Berthelemy**, Digital Learning Manager, CABI
4. **Prof. Mandla S. Makhanya,** Principal and Vice Chancellor, University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria-South Africa
5. **HE Mr. Chief Thesele Maseribane**, Minister of Communication, Science and Technology, Kingdom of Lesotho
6. **Prof. Mahjoub AOUNI,** President**,** Virtual University of Tunisia, Tunis, Tunisia

Discussant: Prof. Jude Lubega, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Nkumba University, Uganda

Discussion Points:

1. Opportunities and challenges of learning on-line
2. Value for money: Should universities charge same amount of fees for on-line courses? The issue of missing services to students
3. Choosing the platform for implementing on-line learning: technical consideration
4. Quality of on-line courses and other factors for integrating on-line learning
5. Needed Policy support framework for widening use of ICTs to support delivery of services and address education divide

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