

## African universities should move from research to brand relevance

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### In Summary

Excellence is vital. As African universities engage in both national and international collaborations, undertake ground-breaking research, build capacity and transfer knowledge, the need to link research excellence to their values and purpose is vital.

Higher education institutions remain at the forefront of knowledge production through research and teaching. They continue to lead in professional training for high-level jobs, as well as the education necessary for the sustainable development.

Research is key in ensuring universities stay relevant and connected to their stakeholders. Excellence in research continues to contribute to improved university rankings, relevance and promotes their visibility both online and offline.

Despite the huge volumes of research publications produced and disseminated, communicating research remains a big challenge for African universities.

Gaps between knowledge production, policy and application are evident. The challenge on how to make this knowledge accessible to society, engaging in communication and dialogue for impact remains a key role of African universities and somewhat challenging for them.

The changing communication landscape and the rise of the digital era challenges university communication persons to stay abreast with the new and innovative ways of reaching out to their stakeholders.

But this is no longer enough. African universities must now ensure that their research excellence consequently leads to brand excellence. They should also ensure that their identities, values and purposes are aligned to their commitments both at national and international level.

Building University brands for Relevance. Despite the increasing need for research excellence and its benefits, universities still need to stay connected to service their communities.

Institutions of higher learning are only as relevant as they are committed to addressing and creating solutions for society. Hence aligning their research with purpose ensures their relevance.

Universities are no longer merely responsible, but now also accountable, for contributions to society and environment. Brand relevance, which is enhanced through accountability and transparency, is not owned by the universities, but rather granted by their stakeholders.

The most important and recent shift is that brands can no longer, through the mass media, control what stakeholders think of them. The digital era gives stakeholders more power often in consumer-generated media, which can place the brand reputation, however robust, at risk.

As a result, universities are now encouraged to engage in dialogue to minimise their reputational risks.

The need for dialogue both online and offline is demanded more among the ‘millennials’ many of whom are enrolled at higher education institutions. This means that universities can no longer rely on their reputations of excellence alone. They are required to constantly reflect upon the values they represent, values they add, and their purposes.

As African universities engage in both national and international collaborations, undertake ground-breaking research, build capacity and transfer knowledge, the need to link research excellence to their values and purpose is vital.

Universities need to constantly reflect upon their brand relevance to better position themselves in the global landscape of higher education.

As David Brier (2019) says, “If you don’t give the market the story to talk about, they will define your brand’s story for you.”

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## How can African universities stay relevant during this global pandemic?

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### Summary



The coronavirus pandemic also known as COVID-19 is a global phenomenon that has affected all sectors in every country in the world including higher education.

The pandemic has forced universities to abruptly close and ongoing teaching, research and outreach activities abandoned midway. As a result, administrators and thousands of stranded students have been left unsure of what is next, rethinking their business models and service delivery while maintaining some appearance of normality amidst the unknown.

As centers of learning, teaching, research and outreach, universities find themselves in the same predicament as the rest of the world – How do we continue to stay relevant and viable during this global

pandemic?

**Investing in teaching and learning technologies** – The global pandemic creates opportunities for innovative teaching and learning platforms to thrive. Through online educational platforms such as Webinars, Learning Management Systems (e.g. Moodle), Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that support mobile delivery and distance learning, universities can harness these digital platforms to connect the teaching and learning communities online. MOOCs offer free online courses available for anyone to enroll with an affordable and flexible way to learn new skills, advance ones' career and deliver quality educational experiences at scale.

With the understanding that various students and teachers are at different levels of technology literacy, ICT literacy short courses become vital in making delivery a success. Building capacity of both the students and tutors on how to navigate the platforms, interact with the content and the tutors is what will make these e-learning initiatives sustainable. Universities have a great opportunity to partner with internet service providers to delivery low cost internet access to foster content creation and delivery for higher education institutions.

**Digitalizing research publications** - Over the years, universities have accumulated research publications but little has been done to convert these hard copy publications

into digital formats that allow for more access and sharing. As knowledge strongholds, investing financial and human resources in converting publications into electronic journals increases the value of the research done and allows for knowledge sharing and adoption.

The current lock down allows for universities to digitalize the publications and upload them to e-libraries that can be accessed and used remotely by student communities. As students are away from the universities, electronic journals provide reading reference materials which increases readership of the knowledge generated by higher education institutions.

**Harnessing collaboration and strategic Partnerships** - Universities can no longer work in isolation; more than ever, they need to stay relevant through their innovative teaching and pertinent research that addresses community needs. The global pandemic creates opportunities for the universities to increase their collaborative power and invest in strategic partnerships that nurture their core mandates. For example, Makerere University School of Public Health (MakSPH) in collaboration with the Ministry of Health (MoH) designed and organized a 1-Hour Training/Sensitization on preparing the workplaces for coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). Mutually benefiting partnerships are critical for both small and big wins for higher education institutions.

Creating products and solutions that solve problems becomes the authentic relevancy of universities in today's pandemic times. As the world leans more on digitalization to communicate, collaborate and connect, universities need strategic partners who can support their core mandates.

Despite the impending challenges hindering digitalization such as lack of appropriate ICT skills, limited or no access to power in some areas, costly internet access and limited investments in technology, universities in Africa will need to rethink their business models during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rethinking how to innovatively teach, conduct research and creatively support outreach activities will be critical for the survival of universities during and post the pandemic era.

Africa still lags behind in the integration of ICT in teaching and learning as compared to the entire world with about \$512 Million revenue against USA's \$27 Billion revenue. Investing in ICT for higher education means that the initial set up will be expensive yet rewarding in the long run. Hence capitalizing on strategic partnerships and policy advocacy will be integral for universities staying relevant beyond this pandemic.

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