

RUFORUM Webinar Series (2020)

Learning from a crisis: University leaders' response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Webinar 1: Synthesis Report

Introduction:

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) devastation across the world has been phenomenal in the shortest time since its outbreak in December 2019 in China. COVID-19 impacts have been felt in all spheres of the economy and global operations. Tertiary education has also seen significant interruptions. According to UNESCO, universities and other tertiary education institutions across 175 countries were closed affecting some 220 million learners globally. In the Sub-Saharan Africa region, COVID-19 has affected an estimated 98% of all the tertiary education students as countries imposed measures aimed at containing the spread of the virus. It is further emerging that the pandemic besides getting students off-campus has caused universities to suffer significant revenue losses from tuition and other services offered by their respective campuses.

Furthermore, as the lockdown and other interventions undertaken by various governments across Africa are extended and revised, there is a danger of disruptions in the academic calendar creating and/or delaying the study completion time. Given these disruptions, there is need for immediate response of higher education institutions to explore alternative education arrangements for their students. Most African universities and other tertiary education institutions have moved their operations online but albeit at different levels and scale. There is an urgent need therefore for improved infrastructure to respond to the thrust for blended and remote learning approaches to address the limited mobility for students, staff and other staff, among others. It is important to share lessons and benchmark how universities have been able to confront the immediate challenges and the future projections under the changed environment.

Problem statement:

Similar to all facets of life, the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) has affected the tertiary education sector across the globe. The abrupt closure of universities has had a toll not only on the students but on the staff and the institutions themselves that have to devise mechanisms to sustain engagement with the student community and ensure that they complete the academic year. With varied digital and online capacity, several have to deal with issues of inequality, low connectivity and inadequate capacity of their staff and students to handle online learning amidst reduced finances. On the other hand, African universities and indeed universities across the globe have to demonstrate ability through research and community engagement that they are part of the solution. How then have universities in Africa and Europe addressed the changed environment, what lessons do they have for managing in the face of a crisis?

Webinar Objectives:

- 1- Share lessons from universities in Europe and Africa on how they have embraced the changes in their operational contexts.
- 2- Capture perspectives on what is working, the future projections and long-term plans in what has been termed as the 'new normal'.
- 3- Explored avenues for strengthening collective response and how universities can leverage from one another on the best practices and resources.

The Webinar was moderated by **Professor Christine Dranzoa, Vice Chancellor, Muni University, Arua-Uganda, Panellists** included:

1. Hicham EL HABTI, Secretary General, Mohammed VI Polytechnique University (UM6P), Benguerir-Morocco;
2. Professor Barnabas Nawangwe, Vice Chancellor, Makerere University- Uganda;
3. Professor Francis Petersen, Vice Chancellor, University of Free State- South Africa; and,
4. Professor Arthur Mol, Rector Magnifus, Wageningen University and Research Centre (WUR), Netherlands

Key Learning and Action Points:

- a) **Chances and opportunities** that have been created by COVID in university activities-
 - New research lines addressing COVID health and related challenges emerging. COVID presents the stimulus for universities to re-examine what they can do to be more relevant extending for national development. This will among other issues include climate change and food security; and,
 - Development of online/ remote learning by universities- Universities have to reconfigure the delivery mode to accommodate students from diverse socio economic, connectivity and technological backgrounds. Noting that the shift to remote learning will in the long run increase access to higher education since the physical infrastructure will cease to be a barrier to education. The need however, to develop student support and connectivity tracking systems for online learning is essential for all universities if they are to meet the education targets and objectives for national development.
- b) **Institutional Leadership** in a period of crisis provides collective responsibility and ownership of decisions- (Examples of University of Free State which adopted an integrated approach to the response to COVID with a multidisciplinary executive group chaired by the Vice Chancellor):
 - Benchmarking and preparedness (monitor experiences from other countries and prepare to adjust appropriately and in a participatory manner) -prepare for the pandemic and adjust the university budget accordingly;

- Acknowledge that this is a changed environment and review the priorities where we have to invest the available resources. One such priority is digitization of processes and implementing e-learning;
 - The change in technology and the introduction of mobile telephony is here to stay. This implies that students have to adjust and embrace e-learning (institutions have to package and communicate the 'new normal' to staff, students and other stakeholders).
- c) **Changed volume, sources and utilization of finances-** Universities should be cognisant of the financial shortfalls as a result of reduced enrolment (incoming students) and reduction of capacity by students and benefactors to pay tuition and other fees. Need to understand that over the long term financial resources are going to reduce significantly- thus universities have to:
- Explore alternative sources of income especially from private sector and industry;
 - Lobby campaign for resources- the best way to get out of a recession will be through innovation. Convince governments to invest in R&D, Governments should be the primary resource for R&D;
 - Budget review, prioritisation and reallocation with scenario planning into the future; and,
 - Use university savings to invest in profitable ventures to fulfil institutional thrusts such as infrastructure for digitisation and online learning or maintaining a healthy percentage of international students- (fellowship for international students)
- d) **International collaboration-** Does COVID mark the end of globalisation or is it the beginning of intense collaboration. How do we develop the new forms of collaboration under the existing circumstances?
- Explore new models of collaboration especially how to harness resources from universities across the African continent and globally.
- e) **Coordinated response-** Collective engagement with government and service providers drawing lessons from across the continent and globally. For example, in South Africa public universities response to COVID has involved coming together as a block to discuss and negotiate with government and telecoms for zero rated data bundles for learning purposes.

Conclusions:

Universities have diverse means for managing the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic. At the same time, it is imperative that the universities consider reviewing their processes in order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. The pandemic provides an opportunity for breaking barriers and boundaries within Africa as they share resources to promote higher education. Emerging options for resilience in the new era would be: Running Universities in a business model; innovatively utilize the human resource within the university to co-create relationships with the private sector and philanthropy that have models that may have application to universities and other academic institutions. Universities have the

potential to be independent and generate ideas that can be used by Governments and other bodies seeking solutions. They should demonstrate their relevance and contribute meaningfully to national development. A value proposition of each university beyond the provision of human resource to drive economic growth should be articulated. Institutional leadership, strategic partnerships and benchmarking will all provide appropriate COVID- 19 pandemic response frameworks for universities in Africa.

RUFORUM Secretariat, 10 June 2020