

How Kenyan Universities are Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic

Kenyan universities, like their counterparts throughout the world, have been adversely affected by the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic that has paralyzed activities, events, and operations from farming, to transport, to education, and to just about everything else in between, in cities and in towns, both large and small, and even in remote villages. While it is true that all sectors of the economy continue to be grossly adversely affected by the pandemic, and that economic survival in the aftermath will be a grave challenge for most, the space of the university will be an interesting one to watch. This is because universities tend to play a very unique role in economic development, both in boom and in recession. For much of the developed world, for example, universities become the fall-back plan for many of the unemployed during a recession, as they go back to re-equip themselves with what they perceive as paths to new job opportunities.

In this article, however, we wish to look into how Kenyan universities have been affected by the pandemic, and how they have coped and continue to cope with closure of universities following President Kenyatta's order on Sunday 15th March that universities, colleges, and technical institutions have until Friday 20th to close down. Along with other learning institutions like primary and secondary schools, Kenyan universities had to close down operations and to send both students and lecturers home between Monday 16th and Friday 20th March 2020. All Kenyan universities closed down, with a large majority terming it 'indefinite closure' in their communication to their stakeholders. The January-April 2020 semester that started in the second week of January was in its 10th of a 12-week session, and just a few weeks away from the onset of end of semester examinations. With the Coronavirus being the new phenomenon that it is, it was not clear to anyone for how long the university closure would last, thus the 'indefinite closure' clause. As more information on the Coronavirus pandemic became available in the media thereafter, however, it became clear that the closure was for the long haul, and that, therefore, there was need to come up with ways to provide teaching and learning support to students from their various locations and vantage points.

Online Classes

What followed within the next one to two weeks were efforts to launch online classes for students, which was done with mixed results. Whereas online classes have offered clear opportunities for students to continue with both their lessons and academic programmes while on 'lockdown' at home, it has not presented equal opportunities to students for access compared to the regular face-to-face mode of delivery. This is because not every student has the capacity to uptake online lessons, nor are all lecturers adequately prepared to deliver them. The results were that it took longer than expected to set these online classes up where that was done, and still a large portion of the student population was not effectively reached with the lessons.

Challenges with Online Classes

Among the specific challenges experienced by Kenyan universities in transitioning from a traditional face-to-face classroom teaching and learning to online classes include inadequate information technology (ICT) facilities and equipment on the part of the university; inadequate preparedness on the part of academic staff to carry out effective teaching and learning; additional costs related to data bundles needed by both students and their lecturers to access online materials; inability of a majority of students to access learning materials online due to lack of the necessary technical skill sets; unavailability of internet access to rural based students due to distance from towns; among other considerations.

Which Universities Have Succeeded

The extent to which a Kenyan university has succeeded in transferring its teaching and learning activities online is directly related to a few factors, including its pre-existing ICT infrastructure before the pandemic hit; the level of technology 'savvy-ness' among both its student and staff populations; the general classification of its student population as either urban or rural; both the business and financial acumen of the university; and the pre-existing level of involvement in the different modes of online learning, among other considerations.

How Effective Are Online Classes

Four weeks on, it can be safely stated that in spite of efforts by many Kenyan universities to move teaching and learning online, a disproportionately large majority of Kenyan university students remain grossly behind in both their semester schedules and academic programmes, largely due to factors already pointed out in this article.

Recommendations for Way Forward

Exclusive online teaching and learning being a relatively new phenomenon, it is a good idea for the Kenya National Government, through the Ministry of Education, State Department of Higher Education, in collaboration with the Commission for Higher Education, to come up with a mechanism or model through which Kenyan universities can be empowered with the knowledge, skills, and other necessary resources to make sure that there is developed a robust structure to support online teaching and learning among all Kenyan universities. This becomes even more important and more urgent in the context of the apparent impending prolonged 'indefinite closure' of Kenyan universities.

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