

Challenges and Opportunities Brought About by COVID 19 Pandemic in Institutions of Higher Learning

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ABSTRACT

COVID 19 has disrupted learning and inflicted losses in terms of lives and the economy. On a lighter note, it has also opened new opportunities in the education sector. Specifically, it is likely to accelerate the adoption of online learning.

INTRODUCTION

COVID 19 was first reported in Wuhan, China on 30th December 2019. Around that time, none of us would have thought that COVID 19 would jump borders and affect the way we lived or conducted our academic affairs. However, the magnitude of the problem was brought home on 15th March 2020 when the Kenyan government abruptly ordered closing of all institutions of learning, thereby disrupting nearly 17 million learners countrywide.

What followed was a state of confusion, anxiety and dismay. Amidst this uncertainty, MIUC, officially commenced online classes on 12th June 2020. Prior to this, a series of trainings had been conducted by the ICT team to prepare both staff and students for this new normal. The

first 2 weeks were spent on training lecturers and student on how to access the e-learning platform, how to enroll, how to upload content, how to perform live classes, grade student, etc. Lecturers were also trained on Instructional Design for E-Learning while students were trained on Digital Citizenship.

To enhance speedy communication and prompt technical support, WhatsApp groups were formed that brought together lecturers, students and the technical support team in one common forum. The issues that emerged and which needed attention included the ease of use and access to e-learning services, quality of presentations and delivery of content by the lecturers, customer care services in terms of technical support and speed of response time. Similarly, experiences by both students and lecturers in the use of the E-learning Moodle platform was also sought in order to further streamline the e-learning processes.

It was noted that students were spending an average of Kenya shillings 100 per day on acquisition of bundles and were doing approximately 6 classes in a week. It was reported that many students were of the view that they were not wasting away at home and were happy to be progressing with their academic pursuit at the comfort of their homes. There were also substantial savings in terms of foregoing hostel and travelling expenses. One of the students was quoted saying that, 'The e-learning has changed my perspective about learning. I enjoy learning in the confines of our home.' The fact that students were not endangering their lives in schools from COVID 19 and were instead progressing at the safety of their homes was a source of joy to many parents.

From the technical support team, the initial stages were overwhelming due to the many queries and the need for both virtual and physical support needed by both students and staff. The

services were basically rendered 24/7 and were reported to be timely and excellent. Regarding provision of remote access to information resources, an online digital library was mounted from where students could access e-books, e-journals, notes and the past examination papers. The library staff was also sending resources to users through e-mail and WhatsApp platforms especially to those without constant supply of the internet.

Some of the challenges identified during the initial stages included some students' inability to create memorable accounts and log-in credentials. For instance, the log-in credentials required the use of a complex password made up of a capital letter, a symbol, Arabic numerals and at least 8 characters and was therefore found to be complex and challenging. Some students without Wi-Fi at their homes were reported to have challenges acquiring bundles. Some students reported to being unable to upload assignments, thereby resorting to use of e-mails which was wrong. It was also noted that some students were not using official names online thereby creating identity crisis while some lecturers took long to upload content in the Moodle. The initial teething problems were however resolved and surmounted with time.

Some important observations included the fact that virtual classes needed not to last for more than one and half hours owing to diminishing students' concentration span. It was also noted that uploading structured content in various multimedia formats made them more interesting and palatable to students. Using a variety of platforms for live classes such as KENET, Big Blue Button, Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft 360, among others helped to ease the network traffic congestion.

Currently, although physical classes have resumed, MIUC has adopted a hybrid approach where both physical, online and virtual classes are conducted when need arises. It is worth noting that, virtual and online classes are likely to take over the evening and part time learning which have been important sources of revenue for many universities. Indeed, several Kenyan universities are still conducting their classes online due to fear associated with contracting the deadly COVID 19 which has claimed the lives of many intellectuals. The fear that had long been associated with the quality of online classes may be coming to an end soon. The African universities may have to borrow the curriculum design from their Western counterparts who have been offering online classes for decades. For instance, the method of assessment may need to change drastically to allay fears of cheating and academic dishonesty. Therefore, although COVID 19 has disrupted learning and inflicted losses in terms of lives and to the economy, on a lighter note, it has also opened new opportunities in the education sector and is likely to accelerate the adoption of online learning.