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Re-imagining higher education in Africa in the “new normal”

The COVID-19 pandemic has recalibrated education as we know it, as well as life and work in general. This pandemic has taught us in Africa that that we should;

- i. Ask and redefine the purpose of education; and
- ii. Provide a solution to new ways of access

COVID-19 has taught us that our Education must produce goods and services. In other words, education must be used as a weapon to confront and fight poverty and problems rather than a way to escape poverty-the question is fight poverty or flight from poverty? Flight from poverty design mode is education for employment seeking-colonial design. Fight mode is education for job creation,

modernisation and industrialisation -post-colonial design.

In Zimbabwe we are humbled by the fact that the Government of Zimbabwe has reconfigured the Higher and Tertiary Education System from a tripartite education system of teaching, research and community service (Education 3.0) which produces only literate workers (Flight mode) to Education 5.0 that include Innovation and Industrialisation (Fight mode) . We are building Innovation Hubs and Industrial Parks at Higher Education Institutions to implement it and the results are beginning to show.

Innovations for teaching and learning and closing digital divide

In response for the need to continue learning during the COVID 19 induced lockdown, our universities through their Innovation hubs are developing E-Learning platforms and other related applications using open source software. In fact, they started this as early as February 2020 when the predictions were dire on the COVID-19 front. We are now working with the telecommunication companies to improve access to data by our students and staff through zero rating for University and College websites, as well as making data cheaper and accessible.

Resourcing higher education institutions University finances

The Government of Zimbabwe has allocated additional resources to enable accessibility to e-learning. Government has allocated around 3 million USD to enhance capacity for e-learning

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and more resources are being considered. As part of the response to the COVID 19 pandemic, the private sector has come in big way to support the Government initiatives to facilitate learning during the pandemic. Universities have benefited from zero rated e-learning websites courtesy of local mobile networks. In addition, the tariffs for data bundles have been significantly reduced as well as offering free Wi-Fi for students around campus.

Innovations for engaged universities-redefining university-community-private sector-policy engagement

As part of the response to the pandemic, Government of Zimbabwe supported State Universities to successfully set up semi-automated manufacturing plants for the production of industrial and household personal care products, personal protective equipment and allied health products as a way to fight COVID-19. To this end by June 2020 Universities had produced up to USD5 000 000 worth of goods to fight COVID-19.

The successful COVID-19 response interventions that the State Universities implemented riding on the thriving establishment of Innovation Hubs and Industrial Parks, has demonstrated that if sufficiently capacitated through capitalization, Education 5.0 is able to commercially produce goods and services to satisfy local community needs and international demand. This model is proving to be robust, flexible and responsive to Zimbabwe national economy.

Linkages with the private sector have proven fruitful and natural given the reconfiguration of education from Education 3.0 to Education 5.0. Research, Innovation and Industrialisation is where Higher Education Institutions meet private enterprise and even produce private enterprises.

Identifying immediate and long-term opportunities for universities to respond to disruptions in education systems and institutions

The COVID-19 pandemic gave us deep lessons on the Design of our Higher Technology Education (THE) especially Health Sciences and Medical Education, as well as the need to transform it to be comprehensive and to produce goods and services. The following demonstrates how. With the advent of COVID-19, we encountered revealing questions, demands and needs from our Medical Doctors: (1) They asked for the need to import Therapeutic Drugs and Sanitizers which we do not manufacture-thereby showing limited capacity in Pharmaceutical and Biopharmaceutical Engineering; (2) They asked for the need to import Hospital Equipment and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)- showing lack of capacity to manufacture-limited capacity in Biomedical Engineering; (3) They asked about how to deal with the Virus which means our biomedical science is weak-Limited capacity in Biomedical Science; (4) They asked for a Health Strategy which they overly relied on International

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organisations- Limited capacity in Health Strategy formulation; but (5) They said they are more than ready and able to treat COVID-19 patients when the first four needs are fulfilled-well trained Clinicians.

The policy lesson is that we have to reconfigure the way we study and undertake health and medical sciences in Africa. Our health and medical education must embrace all 5 pillars of a national health system.

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The way our HTE is delivered going forward shall be blended learning, a combination of face to face and E-learning. The Education must also have a purpose. For this to happen, there is urgent need to reconfigure our Higher Education from the Education 3.0 design to Education 5.0 design for purposes of employment creation through the production of goods and services in an industrialisation and modernisation mode.

Our Education has to work for Africa. Our Education has to create employment. Our Education has to Industrialise and modernise Africa. For this to happen, there has to be a change in the Design of our Higher Education systems in Africa. This will attract investment in Higher Education. Investment is attracted when the purpose and design of Higher Education promises societal returns in the form of production of goods and services, i.e., through an industrialisation and modernisation functionality of Higher Education.

This is our ninth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM Thought Pieces on the Corona Pandemic. You can get more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You may also share your thought piece about the Pandemic with us by writing to e.adipala@ruforum.org and copying m.arena@ruforum.org

About the Author

Professor Amon Murwira is the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology Development in Zimbabwe. He is a full Professor in Aerospace Earth Observation, Satellite remote sensing, Geographic Information Science and Global Satellite Navigation Systems (GNSS), Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (Drone Technology) Applications and Geospatial Intelligence. He was a panelist during the RUFORUM Second Webinar series titled ‘Re-imagining higher education in Africa in the “new normal”’ which took place on 19th June 2020.

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