

RUFORUM 16th Annual General Meeting 2020

High Level Dialogue on Online Teaching and Learning

Theme: Realignment towards Online Teaching and Learning in Universities: Learning from each other

Side Event Report

Introduction:

The COVID-19 Pandemic has clearly demonstrated Africa's vulnerability to global pandemics and other natural emergencies such as floods and desert locusts, which struck the Eastern part of Africa in recent years. While it remains true that the Africa's education sector has been severely affected by COVID-19, the state of higher education on the Continent has long been a cause for concern even before the Pandemic. The Pandemic is exacerbating the already existing vulnerabilities in the education sector thus creating an urgent need to build a reformed education system on the Continent. This reformation entails a change in the perspectives and practices of the policy makers and educators, and requires much thought concerning the why, who, what and how of education. Digitization can help rebuild the disrupted education system, ensure that teaching and learning continues in the new normal, and possibly provide the much needed resilience. Indeed, a number of efforts have been made towards the transformation of higher education in Africa through integration of digital technologies. The COVID-19 Pandemic has accelerated a shift by universities to digitalization. Digital technologies for online teaching and learning are a way to recover from the COVID-19 crisis and to provide the resilience needed for Universities to forge ahead. It should be recognised that digitization must cover all aspects of the university business and should not only be limited to teaching and learning.

It has been argued that for digital technologies to cause a significant transformation in higher education, approaches to their implementation must be given sufficient attention involving a level of change in practice. It is against this background that RUFORUM held an online dialogue to discuss the advances and opportunities of integration of digital technologies, especially for teaching and learning. The dialogue focused on exploring successes and challenges Universities continue to experience in the implementation of online teaching and learning.

Side Event Objectives:

The online dialogue on *Realignment towards Online Teaching and Learning in Universities* focused on the following:

1. Establish what digital technologies are currently influencing universities in Africa;
2. Discuss the ways in which digital technologies can be integrated into university system in Africa;
3. Outline the opportunities and challenges in implementing online teaching and learning particularly in universities in Africa;
4. Explore the skills and competences required for leadership, staff and students to enable universities and other sectors integrate the use of digital technologies; and,

5. Examine the policies and other reforms needed to facilitate effective online teaching and learning in African universities.

The online dialogue was organised in two Sessions, which focused on policies and institutional frameworks for integration of digital technologies in online teaching, and advances and opportunities for integration of digital technologies in university education systems. Prof. Dora F. Edu-Buandoh, Pro Vice Chancellor, University of Cape Coast, Ghana and Ms. Sara AOUAD, Pedagogical Team Lead and eLearning Specialist, Mohamed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P), Morocco, moderated the dialogue.

The presentations and discussions were given by:

Session One:

1. Prof. Barnabas Nawangwe, Vice Chancellor Makerere University, Uganda
2. Prof. Adipala Ekwamu, Executive Secretary, RUFORUM
3. Prof. Address Malata, Vice Chancellor, Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST), Malawi
4. Prof. Youssao Abdou Karim Issaka representing HE Hon. Prof. Dr. Eleonore Ladekan Yayi, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Benin

Session Two:

1. Prof. Francis Petersen, Vice Chancellor & Principal, University of Free State, Southern Africa
2. Dr. Tony Frank, Chancellor of the Colorado State University, USA
3. Prof. Arturo Condo, Rector, EARTH University, Costa Rica
4. Dr. Thandi Mgwebi, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Nelson Mandela University South Africa
5. Prof. Theresia Nkuo-Akenji, Vice Chancellor, University of Bamenda, Cameroon

Webinar Participation:

The audience was drawn from China, Costa Rica, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, United Kingdom, USA and over 28 African Countries. The participants included university leaders, professors, teaching assistants, students, post-doctoral fellows, ICT Directors and Managers, private sector actors, policy makers, RUFORUM Alumni, CGIAR experts, university networks, university librarians and research fellows.

Key Learning and Action Points:

The dialogue on *Realignment towards Online Teaching and Learning in Universities* provided several perspectives, many key messages and action points that can be grouped into three (3) main categories as follows:

1. Continental and regional initiatives on online teaching and learning:

Considering that the COVID-19 Pandemic is a multi-dimensional crisis, it requires a concerted and multi-lateral approach to developing short and long-term mitigation strategies.

At the continental level, the African States were not prepared for this health crisis in terms of education. Today, digital technologies have and are still making inroads into education on the Continent. There is an urgent need to boost digitization to ensure that teaching and learning continues. It is pleasing to note that the African Union policies such as Agenda 2063 and the European Union-African Union Digital Economy Task Force both support the growth of digital technology on the continent. Further, initiatives such as the Global Coalition for Education, a platform for collaboration and exchange to protect the right to education during this unprecedented disruption and beyond, need to be supported. This initiative also brings together large technological companies which are willing to help African States.

2. Linking African universities with knowledge centers for online teaching and learning:

The need for collective action to pursue an implementable plan with respect to online teaching and learning requires that universities in Africa get linked to each other through knowledge centres. Such linkages could enhance reach and subsequent impact of online teaching and learning, create synergy on continent-wide efforts, avoid duplication of efforts, and actualize “learning from each other” to be more than just a cliché. There is need for partnerships for:

- i. Creation of **centers of excellence** in online learning and teaching in different universities in Africa.
- ii. Creation of an **online forum**, e.g. Google Groups, dedicated to online learning and teaching in Africa.
- iii. Creation of an **annual peer-reviewed conference** dedicated to online learning and teaching in Africa.
- iv. Creation of an **African Journal of Online Learning and Teaching** dedicated to online learning and teaching in Africa.

Through these means, universities in Africa can connect with each other and rethink how to factor in time and distance, re-strategize the conduct of joint research, and identify opportunities for international collaboration. Globally, there is a huge potential for collaboration for increased sharing of experiences and knowledge by academia and universities between Latin America and Africa.

In order to be more effective and efficient at facilitating linkages and supporting the Network to implement online teaching and learning, the RUFORUM Secretariat needs to have better capacity. Further, the Secretariat should be able to facilitate the creation and sharing of quality digital learning content across the Network. In this vein, the Secretariat has planned to establish an e-learning platform, train technical staff to manage the platform, train staff from 3-6 pilot universities on online content authoring and delivery, host short capacity building courses run by the Secretariat, and host of contents from universities, as part of the capacity building.

3. Capacity building on online teaching and learning

Learning is itself a part of human life. The adoption of technology for online teaching and learning needs not to lose focus on the purpose of learning, what goes around it, with it and through it. There is an urgent need for capacity building for effective adoption of online and learning.

i. *Human resources:*

Skills and competences are required for leaders, staff and students to enable universities effectively use digital technologies. For leaders, key skills include technology literacy, online platform support in course creation and management, as well as online staff and student performance tracking. For academic staff, the key skills needed include technology literacy, tools for effective communication and online platform usage. For the students, skills relate to technology literacy, skills for communication and online platform usage and time management to effectively plan online teaching. These skills partially address some of the following challenges for the adoption of technology for online teaching and learning: how to use digital technology; lack of experience in online pedagogy by most academic staff; lack of experience in online learning by students; development, delivery and assessment of contents; and, quality assurance in online programmes.

It is worth noting that in this new normal, there is preference for some form of face-to-face interaction on campus by some students although online studying offers opportunities for effective time utilization. In this spirit, other universities in Africa could learn from the example of the Nelson Mandela University that has developed two (2) learning pathways ranging from digital to face-to-face teaching and combinations of the two. Such blended approaches remain important for fostering student learning, keep focus on what our constituencies need and look out for win-win situations. It is also important to note that while technology is significant in the development of simulations, such cannot entirely substitute personal experiences.

Universities should provide flexible learning environments that not only support teaching and learning, but also other services and activities such as e-academic advise, e-tutorials, online mental health and online modules to enhance graduate employability. In addition, integration of digital technologies for online applications, online registrations, effective use of Learning Management Systems and data analytics, virtual meetings/graduate ceremonies, flexible human resources model such as staff working from home and internationalization.

(i) *Infrastructure:*

The systematic infrastructural and funding issues have meant that universities across the African continent have been slow to meet the online learning and teaching demands even before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The general lack digital infrastructure and data which are both required for online teaching and learning, remain big barriers on the African continent. Further, challenges of internet access, electricity connectivity, and access to

devices, are an issue for the adoption of online education, and have implications on inclusivity in most African countries.

Therefore, more funding is required to build infrastructure and improve capacity in our universities to effectively implement online teaching and learning.

(ii) *Policies, strategies and guidelines:*

Leaders must, today, leverage the moment and seek opportunities for the African knowledge ecosystem to pull through the immediate crisis and to build routes for longer term resilience against future shocks to the education systems of this continent. The lack of policy frameworks, low institutional funding, lack or poor accreditation, and poor attitude for online teaching and learning, all need correction. It is time to have mindset change on policies related to online teaching and learning. The policy environment needs to be well aligned to support online teaching and learning and address the issue of digital divide which exist in our communities. Deliberate efforts should be taken to reach out to policy leaders for needed reforms in national and institutional digital related policies and strategies.

Other African countries should take a leaf from the Government of Benin which has supported the development of an online platform for Higher Education institutions for continued teaching and learning even during the COVID-19 Pandemic, introduced zero rating for accessing the online platform, prioritised eLearning, launched a project to re-structure higher education based on digital learning, and is encouraging virtual activities through provision of free internet systems on student campuses. Another example is that of the Government of South Africa which has assisted universities to purchase laptops for students and facilitate access to internet connectivity through provision of data.

Conclusion:

COVID-19 has severely disrupted Africa's education systems which were already a cause for concern even before the Pandemic. Digitization can help rebuild the disrupted education system, ensure that teaching and learning continues in the new normal, and perhaps provide resilience against future shocks. Realignment towards online teaching and learning in universities requires response and strong support at the global, continental, and regional levels; such as, through the United Nations initiatives and platforms, and the African Union initiatives and frameworks. Collective action and partnerships are needed to pursue implementable plans for the development and adoption of online teaching and learning, requiring universities in Africa get linked to each other, and with those in other continents. Finally, there is a need to address the limited/lacking human capacities, policy, and digital infrastructure and data for the effective transition to online teaching and learning, and digitization of entire university business models. The ongoing efforts by the RUFORUM Secretariat through the AfriDAP initiative should be supported to foster harnessing digital technologies for teaching, learning, resource sharing and generating innovations.