



Emerging Opportunities and Challenges for Higher Institutions of Learning in the post Covid-19 era.



The closure or lockdown of all education institutions across Africa and the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak put the student population and their parents at stake with arguable responses to handling the continuation of teaching and learning while at home. It is evident in many of the African countries that they were not prepared for the situation that had befallen them. Many of the African institutions of learning in the prevailing circumstances could not easily continue delivering teaching and learning to its students because the education environments were not well prepared. The educational institutions indeed lacked capacity (human and infrastructure) to partake their mandate within such trying moments which prevented people from meeting physically and many countries had gone to lockdowns.



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Substantial gaps were identified in the preparedness of teachers to effectively handle students' teaching and learning ubiquitously. The teachers lacked adequate ICT skills to teach using the virtual means and also the institutions were under resourced in terms of ICT infrastructure to use. Furthermore, in an era (21st century) where majority of the students are digital natives that require to be taught ubiquitously by their digital immigrant teachers, understanding the readiness of teachers to integrate ICT in their teaching and learning is paramount.

There was emerging evidence that teachers within the institutions of learning continued to be trained in conventional manner that enabled them to only handle students as and when there was face-to-face interaction. They lacked the ability to teach the students beyond the physical premises and had the mentality that learning could hardly take place. The teachers preferred to be disseminators of



knowledge to the students and hence a teacher centeredness was the normal in many of the institutions. It was also evident that ICT pedagogy had been under looked by many of the educational institutions despite that UNESCO had made a call to African institutions to use innovative ways to improve on literacy. Less investment had been undertaken in terms of ICTs to use for teaching and learning hence deterring adoption in many institutions. All these factors caused challenges to the educational institutions and they were grappling on how to survive amidst the pandemic. It was also observed that effective teacher development systems across the world rely on availability of quality data to guide strategic decision making. However, majority of the African countries did not have such systems that collected data on ICT Pedagogy for teachers to ascertain the state of need to build capacity in order to deal with the prevailing situation. Existence of observatories on ICT pedagogical integration are very rare indeed and collecting and utilising such data for decision making is not possible.

To avert the existing challenge that had befallen, several governments and agencies such as RUFORUM took decisions to leapfrog and encouraged many of the educational institutions to adopt ICT for teaching and learning. RUFORUM within its mandate to support its network universities took a decision to support in capacity building for staff on how to integrate ICT in teaching and learning. This deliberate effort taken by RUFORUM was aimed at keeping the network universities alive and in business. An assessment on ICT adoption within selected universities was rolled out to ascertain the state of ICT adoption within the network. This was undertaken in order to understand where the gaps existed and what efforts were needed to improve on the state of integration.

It is important to note that several educational institutions have gone through a series of transformation within the past 2 years of Covid-19. These have been influenced by the paradigm shift that occurred most especially during the lock down and were required to continue doing business in order to remain relevant. This paradigm shift from traditional face - face to virtual teaching and learning led to numerous changes hence creating opportunities and challenges for the educational institutions. In this discourse, some of the opportunities that educational institutions have got to further boost their business are shared. Also, challenges are presented in order to create awareness on what to avoid during the adoption of ICT in education by educational institutions.

Opportunities Created

Curriculum redesign to suit the digital migrant and native: Several educational institutions have been able to redesign their curricula to take care of the new normal brought about the Covid-19. The teaching activities have been modified to make sure that they are more student centred, delivery methods have been improved to cater for the virtual means of delivery hence leading to a more blended teaching and learning for the future. The curricula assessment methods have been improved





to allow online assessments that can be carried out in a variety of ways and depending on the available infrastructure. The curricula is more students centred and calls for students centred and collaborative strategies of delivery.

Capacity building for the digital era: Many of the educational institutions having realised that they do not have adequate capacity (human and infrastructure) to work in the new normal and hence they decided to invest. Several institutions embarked on human capacity training in ICT pedagogy and with support from organisation such as RUFORUM they have been able to leapfrog. Also, some of the educational institutions have acquired ICT infrastructure to support them in the new delivery method adopted. This opportunity has helped educational institutions to stay afloat during the Covid-19 pandemic. Teacher are able to use ICT for teaching and learning which is a good boost for educational institutions.

Ubiquitous Accessibility to Education: The adoption of ICT in teaching and learning has opened up opportunities for educational institutions to avail their business from anywhere, at any time and at the wish of the stakeholders. Several educational institutions that adopted ICT in their teaching and learning have tapped into other new markets and have started training students beyond their own borders. This opportunity will lead to more income for the educational institutions.

Entry into the Global Village: Many of the educational institutions only depended on their local capacity to be able to teach their students. With adoption of ICT in education, some institutions are collaboratively teaching with other staff in other foreign countries. For example, RUFORUM has organised a series of training session for member university staff on ICT Pedagogy and Nkumba University has ably supported in the training. It is therefore, possible to reach out to expertise beyond the institution to support teaching and learning.

Localised Digital Content: The world statistics on digital content have always presented Africa in the lowest level in terms of digital content development. During the Covid-19 pandemic and due to the paradigm shift, several educational institutions have been able to develop localised digital content for students to use ubiquitously. This content was developed for students to use as supplementary material to the real-time teaching offered to them via synchronous platforms.

Improved Quality Assurance: Online education is delivered beyond the physical classroom and therefore the teaching and learning can be received by anyone. Many of the teachers have been more careful during delivery, have prepared adequately before delivery and have been more professional during teaching. By doing so, there has been improved quality in the content delivery by the teachers and hence quality assurance adhered to by the different stakeholders. It should also be noted that the



different bodies in charge of quality assurance within educational institutions have been more vigilant.

Challenges Created

Continuous Upgrade: By adopting ICT in teaching and learning, educational institutions have the mandate to make sure that all capacity built is upgraded from time to time to cope with the dynamism of ICT. The teachers have to be retooled from time to time and the infrastructure has to be refurbished and upgraded to cope with the times. Therefore, this cost has to be adopted within the institutional budgets going forward.

Plagiarism: Educational Institutions are faced with one of the biggest problems and that is academic theft. With the increase in online assessments and coursework given to students, there is increase in students stealing from the internet to present as their own. Therefore, with institutions not having software to detect plagiarism, a lot of content and data stolen from the internet will be presented as students' work. All educational institutions should acquire plagiarism software to support them in detecting stolen academic work.

Sustainability: Many of the educational institutions that have adopted ICT in teaching and learning do not have frameworks under which it is being implemented. The policy to govern their implementation are missing and therefore this adoption has not been deep-rooted into the institution. With time, such adoption will not be sustainable and hence will fail in the long run.

Cost of Adoption: The cost for adoption of ICT in teaching and learning in relation to digital content development is high including the internet used during delivery. Creating localised digital content has always been expensive and continues to be due to little capacity amongst staff to do it themselves. The cost of bandwidth is still very high across many African countries and deters from effective adoption.

The paradigm shift to online teaching and learning caused by the Covid-19 has impacted on several educational institutions and therefore changing their business processes. There are several opportunities that came as a result of adoption but also challenges. There is no one solution fit for all that can be recommended for the challenges but for institutions to innovatively work on solving the challenges to be reduced as low as possible.

Needed Action for Africa

Build and Share Existing Capacity

African educational institutions should start working towards sharing the capacity they hold in relation to human and infrastructure. Africa has several expertise in ICT pedagogy and should be tapped into to upgrade skills of the other teachers. African educational institutions can start collaboratively offering degrees by having multiple institutions teaching on a specific degree programme. Let the best staff teach the course units through e-learning across the entire continent. This means one staff can teach more than 5000 students across Africa without leaving their country. This means that educational can become cheaper and collaborative in nature.

It should be noted that some educational institutions have already invested in ICT infrastructure which can be shared with other stakeholders. Such institutions should be used as centres of excellence and supporting other educational institutions in areas such as data back-up, digital content development studios, among others.

ICT adoption in Education: The usefulness of ICT in teaching and learning has been proven by the outbreak of Covid-19. It is time for all African educational institutions to realise that it is a must to have ICT adopted in education if there are going to survive within the 21st century. All budgets of educational institutions need to be revised to cater for the ICT pedagogical integration.

Local Digital Content Development: Africa has been found lagging behind in terms of local digital content development as compared to the rest of the world. It is time that African educational institutions participate in local digital content development in order to raise the profile. There are already free spaces where such content can be freely presented. For example, there is less African educational Digital Content on YouTube as compared to the rest of the world.

African Educational Digital Observatory: Today in Africa there is hardly any place you can visit to find information concerning educational institutions. How Africa is prepared in ICT Pedagogical Integration is unknown because there is no central observatory where such information can be easily retrieved and used for decision making. Capacity gaps are not easily identifiable within the African institutions of learning. It is recommended that RUFORUM initiates the development of the African Educational Digital Observatory starting with its member institutions. The generated data will go a long way to further impact on the educational sector within the African continent.

Strong Quality Assurance Frameworks: Africa needs to develop strong quality assurance frameworks that support it in monitoring and tracking effective use of ICTs in education. These frameworks may be developed at a national and regional level in order to avoid poor implementation



of ICT within the educational sector hence affecting the quality of the outputs (graduates). If there are going to be collaborative programmes across institutions of learning in Africa, they need to be following a common standard that was agreed upon.

About the Author:

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