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Positive Learner Attitude: Why it Matters for Effective Delivery of Higher Education in the ‘New Normal’

The spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) across the globe has brought with it several effects that have hit most tertiary education institutions. Shutting down classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and other teaching and teaching facilities as well as sending students home, were some of the immediate actions in response to an imminent and present danger of exposure to the virus for both staff and students. The non-discriminatory nature of the disease required that world-class universities, technical colleges and anything else in between follow suit in the response to containment measures instituted by local and national authorities, alike.

Some higher education institutions quickly reorganized their systems or simply transitioned to already existing alternatives to in-classroom and in-laboratory instruction to ensure continuity. For example, Zhejiang University in China managed to get more than 5,000 courses online just two weeks into the transition (World Economic Forum, 2020). Unfortunately, other institutions, especially those in low income countries, have up until now remained behind and have with much difficulty accepted the loss of income, academic calendar time and some of their own staff. Today, it is estimated that globally, over 1.2 billion learners are out of the classroom due to the Pandemic. But what needs to be done to ensure that, in general, even in a crisis situation like this one, there is access to safe, relevant and quality education?

The COVID-19 Pandemic has brought forth what is now being called the ‘new normal’. This ‘new normal’ now affects how even the simplest of things is done. For the higher education sector, it entails the change in the perspectives and practices of the educators, and requires much thought concerning the why, who, what and how of education. Much discussion has so far surrounded the need for the education system to shift from traditional approaches to the use of remote delivery methods which may include some simple means like the use of community radios on the one hand, and the use of more sophisticated internet based teaching and learning platforms such as Google Classroom, Moodle, Blackboard, Astria, Zoom, to mention a few. There is also a call for higher education institutions to reconfigure their existing curriculum to fit the new delivery methods and take advantage of potential education partners who already

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possess educational programmes and platforms for online or remote learning. There is a very strong recognition and urgent call for the retooling of education/teaching staff to acquire skills to deliver education in the ‘new normal’.

While online learning has been shown to increase retention of information and to take less time, this is yet to be said of other remote learning approaches under different learning circumstances. Today, in effect, our higher education students are playing a major role in a huge global experiment, in which a wide variety of teaching and training modalities are being tested, each one with its own level of effectiveness and quality, all for the sake of continued provision of tertiary education (Basset and Arnhold, 2020). This, coupled with the digital divide, has now exposed the socio-economic inequity of distance learning. Additionally, one might ask the question:

What about the learners? What attitude and skills changes are required for learners to transition smoothly from traditional to ‘new normal’ learning methods? Who is taking care of this change?

According to University of Alberta, “a positive attitude helps learners to learn, it lets the learner relax, remember, focus and absorb information as they learn, welcoming them to new experiences and recognizing many different kinds of learning opportunities. And when they can see opportunities, their hope increases”.

It is unlikely that amidst a raging virus, and much uncertainty, illness, death and fear brought about by the COVID-19 Pandemic, most learners across the globe can find an environment conducive for learning today. Additionally, while learners in urbanized parts of the world have access to the internet through different devices for social networking, they need to be assisted to reorient to the appropriate use of such facilities for educational purposes. In finding ways in which learners can be reoriented to more positive learning attitudes in the ‘new normal’, it is important that what has been the influence of the ‘culturalized’ traditional methods be considered. Such methods have promoted, in most instances, dependence on the physical learning facilities as well as the physical presence of the teacher or trainer, and a more teacher-centered education than anything else. In the end, the absence of the ‘physical’ aspects of the traditional methods today could create less inspired, less confident, less creative or less disciplined learners, in some cases. Furthermore, remote learning and the absence of peers in a learning environment could cause a feeling of isolation and a general lack of sustained motivation among learners, resulting into sub-optimal academic performance. The feeling of isolation and frustration is exacerbated by measures such as social distancing and lockdowns to contain the spread of the COVID-19. This reminds one that education is indeed a complex process and is about more than just reading and writing, at all levels.

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An opportunity now exists for universities to study and understand factors that enhance self-regulation and bring out more positive attitudes towards remote learning in the 'new normal'. Universities should seek to include students' self-regulated learning skills and aspects of peer-learning in the design or reconfiguration of courses, while taking into consideration the needs of students with learning disabilities.

References:

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About the Author

Alice Mutiti Mweetwa is the current Deputy Executive Secretary for Programme Development and Implementation at the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) Secretariat in Kampala, Uganda. She is the immediate past Deputy Director for Research and Post Graduate Studies of the University of Zambia (UNZA), a position she held 2017-2019 and a past Deputy Dean for Post Graduate Programmes of the School of Agricultural Sciences (2013-2017). She served on several University boards and committees for quality assurance, policy formulation, income generation, Senate, journals publication, to mention a few. Dr Mweetwa is a Senior Lecturer of soil microbiology and general soil fertility in the Department of Soil Science. She has a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Sciences (Crop Science Major) from UNZA, a master's degree in Agronomy also from UNZA, a master's degree in Environmental Science from Miami of Ohio, and a Doctoral degree from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Since joining the University of Zambia in 2010, she has mentored many undergraduate and post graduate students with whom she has published in several international peer-reviewed journals. She has been a recipient of several fellowships, scholarships and awards at the national, continental and international levels. She is an awardee of the 2017 Young African Researcher, 2016 National Science and Technology Merit Award and the Norman E. Borlaug International Agricultural Science and Technology Fellowship Program 2012. Dr Mweetwa is currently involved with several funded projects in collaboration with other institutions and has participated in mobilizing through competitive grants and other funding from the USAID, World Bank, European Union Commission, African Union Commission, USDA and other sources.

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