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### What are the emerging challenges and issues that face universities in undertaking research in light of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 Pandemic?

With the sudden closure of campuses across the continent to curb the spread of COVID-19, higher education intuitions in Africa are shifting to online learning or distance education programs. The advantage is it can allow for the students to learn at their convenience since it is needless to attend training centers and universities. This large shift to online instruction does not need for the face to face interaction between lecturers and students and between students so there is prevention and control over the spread of the virus. However, this is not the case when it comes to research in most of our universities.

Zoomification does not work in research. Indeed, the coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on research around the continent, shuttering laboratories, aborting field projects, and costing scientists months if not years of work. Even as universities contemplate reopening; if and when governments ease lockdown restrictions—the challenges will be enormous. Most will have to operate with just a few individuals at a time, working in shifts. All large gatherings, including lab/field research activities, are likely to be prohibited. And there will be stark differences in strategy between fields and sometimes even within the same building. At the same time, many institutions are still trying to figure out how and whether to test employees for COVID-19, the coronavirus causing the current pandemic, and what to do if infections resurge.

*The emerging challenges being faced by RUFORUM Member universities*

- i) The closure of the member universities as well as the lockdown has interrupted the proposal development and defense of students which will eventually lead to a delay in the implementation of their research and completion of their studies
- ii) The lockdown interrupted field research activities and lab research activities
- iii) The social distancing interrupted data collection by students doing social research, they are not able to interface with key informants interviews and hold focus group discussions.

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*“We’re not just going to go back to normal, things have changed...There is a new normal”*

What are the implications for the RUFORUM Research and Innovation activities?

For our graduate students, in agriculture mainly, closing the campus and encouraging social distancing means putting research projects on hold, moving meetings online, halting data collection and rethinking expectations around project timelines and dissertation defenses because of the lack of human subjects and in-person collaboration. Graduate students still require collaborative environments where we can develop professionally.

Many universities will struggle to return to their research work:

- One of the biggest challenges university research faces is how to keep their members physically distanced to limit any potential spread of COVID-19
- Working with other researchers isn’t the only challenge, some scientists also have to figure out how to protect farmers and other stakeholders who are part of their research studies. This is very traumatic for everyone; university staff, students, stakeholders
- When labs reopens only half of personnel will be allowed to work at any one time. This may imply that it may take longer to complete the research than what was anticipated.
- Even when research does resume, there’s no guarantee it won’t shut down again, especially if the virus resurges
- We as RUFORUM have calls running yet some institutions are advising their staff not to start new projects, and not start projects that cannot be stopped again on short notice.”
- Regardless of the strategies scientists follow to return to research, they’ll take some important lessons away from the lockdown. **I do hope that the COVID-19 pandemic experience would prompt reflections on us as a network.**

*This is our third 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](http://www.ruforum.org). You may also share your thought piece about the Pandemic with us by writing to [e.adipala@ruforum.org](mailto:e.adipala@ruforum.org) and copying [m.agen@ruforum.org](mailto:m.agen@ruforum.org)*

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### About the Author

Dr. Runyararo Jolyn Rukarwa is the Manager, Research and Innovation at the RUFORUM Secretariat from Zimbabwe. He previously served as a Technical Specialist, Youth Skills Development and Community Engagement. She holds a PhD in Plant Breeding and Biotechnology. Runyararo started her career as a Teaching Assistant at the University of Zimbabwe before joining the International Potato Centre in Uganda and later served as a part time Lecturer at Kyambogo University and a visiting Lecturer at the Makerere University Centre for Crop Improvement in the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. She also served as a Programme Management Assistant for an international programme entitled Agricultural Investors as Development Actors. Runyararo has extensive experience in research in Plant Breeding and Biotechnology, but has also obtained a wealth of experience in administration and coordination of research projects.