

DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVE TEACHING CONTINUITY PLANS TO MOVE CLASSROOMS ONLINE AT COVID-19 ERA IN NIGERIA

CHAPTER ELEVEN

OUTBREAK OF COVID-19: NIGERIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION IN A DEFINING MOMENT

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Abstract

This paper consents to higher education as a very necessary ingredient for training of management workforce that would propel Nigeria's development. It aims at positioning individuals for acquisition of proper value orientation and intellectual capacities for the development of their environment. Inspired by the negative tag on Nigeria as a country that nothing seem to work, the paper relied on secondary sources of data and observation to assert that with single percentage of the national budget to education, decaying or near absence of infrastructure, poor or lack of knowledge facilities such as library and instructional aids, higher education institutions in Nigeria is in a quandary as a result of COVID-19 since online learning and health protocols may not be adequately met. To stem the tide, the study recommended prioritization of students, lecturers and support staff health through extra sanitary measures; scaling up of distance learning platforms, inclusions of lecturers and support staff in COVID-19 aid response. The researchers concluded that the problems of higher education institutions in Nigeria are artificial and in man lies the solutions.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Higher education Public health's online learning.

Introduction

Nigeria's higher education, in-spite of its importance is in a quandary. This importance is informed by two things. One is the status of Nigeria as the most populous country in Africa with a population close to 200 million. The second is that the world has become a global village; resting on or move by high knowledge occasioned by extraordinary penetration and accessibility to worldwide web (www) (Iscan & Nakityok, 2005, Biswajit & Iyoti, 2011). Knowledge is power, lack of it is debilitating. Knowledge empowers higher education students to form their own opinions, to act and transform conditions in their

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communities leading perhaps to a better quality of life. Access to knowledge through higher education gives people greater control over their destinies.

Higher education as referred in this paper covers the post-secondary section of the national education system which is given in the Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Technology including courses given by Colleges of Education, Correspondence Colleges and such institutions as are allied to them. The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2013) gives the aims of higher education as:

1. the development and inculcation of proper value orientation for the survival of the individual and society;
2. the development of the intellectual capacities of individuals to understand and appreciate their environments;
3. the acquisition of both physical and intellectual skills which enable the individuals to develop into useful members of their communities;
4. the acquisition of an objective view of local and external environment (p.3).

The goals of higher education according to Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2013:2) are “teaching, research, dissemination of existing and new information; the pursuit of service to the community and acting as a storehouse of knowledge”. Therefore, higher education institutions are not fashionable trinkets. As aptly stated by Toyo (2004), higher education institutions are custodians, nurses, midwives and inventors of high knowledge. By mid-April 2020, almost every country in the world including Nigeria had implemented nationwide closures of schools and higher education institutions in response to the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic. In Nigeria, the number of persons affected by the pandemic goes up daily just as the number of the dead keeps rising. This has impacted negatively on the ability of higher education institutions to function as “knowledge industries. The closure of schools and all higher education institutions while essential to contain the spread of the pandemic and protect public health precipitated learning crisis at all levels of education especially higher education institutions. Against this background, this paper focuses on the challenges of the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic on higher education in Nigeria.

Economic Impact of Covid-19 on Nigeria Higher Education

Although the full impact of COVID-19 is yet to be known, African Union estimates an average loss of 1.5 points on economic growth by the end of 2020. This is anticipated to exceed that of the 2008 global financial crisis (Mohammedbhai 2020, April 9^h) the author noted further that a significant slow-down or a recession of the global economy is foreseen at the end of the pandemic. This will in turn affect revenues of various countries in the world including Nigeria. Accordingly, the resources available to provide social services including education will be affected. The global economic recession also affects the demand for higher education especially where limited social protection measures are in

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place as families with economic hardships may consider the financial and opportunity cost of higher education unbearable (Kandri, 2020, May 12).

Almost all Africa's 54 countries have contacted COVID-19 virus. The result is that many including Nigeria have closed their borders and have banned international flights. Trade has declined in an alarming rate. For instance, the 2020 budget of Nigeria was based on oil price of US\$57 per barrel; far above the current price of US\$ 22 per barrels. This resulted in a drastic restructuring of the 2020 budget of 10.59 trillion Naira approved by the Nigerian senate in December 2019 to a revised budget of 10.8 trillion naira. The Capital Investment budget has also been cut down by 20 percent, the recurrent budget by 25 percent; privatization proceed by 50 percent and all recruitments halted. In all, the federal Government of Nigeria has cut its budget by 1.5 trillion naira; one percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Explaining the rationale for the reduction in the 2020 budget to the leadership of the National Assembly, the Presidency and other top Federal Government functionaries, Zainab Ahmed, the Finance Minister as quoted in the Guardian (2020, March 4) stated that:

Prior to COVID-19, the Nigerian economy was already fragile and vulnerable... the global economic downturn precipitated by the impact of the corona virus has caused international oil prices plunge as low as US\$22 per barrel on the international market and this has put increasing pressure on the naira and foreign reserves as the crude oil sales receipt declined and the country's micro economic outlook worsened (p.41).

What the Honourable Minister's explanation portends is that economic downturn has impacted negatively on the commitment of the Federal Government of Nigeria towards higher education in the competing demands from healthcare, agriculture and other priority sectors serving vulnerable segments of the Nigerian society. It further implies that support to higher education, research collaborations and partnership schemes; most often directed at critical areas such as strengthening Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) programmes could be massively scaled back which will in-turn affect higher education institutions in Nigeria. The training of management workforce that would propel the nation's development engine are therefore on crutches.

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Adoption of Video Conferencing as “First Aid” Learning Solutions

As COVID-19 pandemic has shattered economics around the world, it has also battered education system in both developed and developing nations including Nigeria. According to Karimi (2020, July 27^h) about 1.5 billion students; close to 90 percent of all primary, secondary and transformative are at home as educators scramble to put in place workable short-term solutions for remote teaching and learning, particularly in emerging markets, where students and school face additional challenges related to financing and available infrastructure. While each level of education in Nigeria faces its unique challenges, it is the higher education segment that may end up, by necessity, triggering a learning revolution. Higher education institutions are distinctive in that their students are old enough to handle the rigors of online work and technologically savvy enough to navigate new platforms. The real challenge lies with the higher education institutions in which they have enrolled. Question is, can traditional campus-based higher institutions adapt by choosing the right technologies and approaches for educating and engaging their students? The successes and failures that unfold should give the Nigerian government and stakeholders in higher education a better grasp of what is possible.

Currently, video-conferencing like zoom and webex are throwing lecturers in higher institutions in Nigeria into lifeline. However, many lecturers are still struggling to maintain the same depth of engagement with students they could have had in a normal classroom setting. This calls for a fast solution in other to avoid a dip in the quality of education they provide. Online education platforms such as courser, and IFC client with global presence can play a useful role by tapping their expertise in online programme design, choice of technology platform and digital marketing to develop the best content either with or for traditional players (Karimi, 2020, July 27). The adoption of online solution in teaching and learning in recent months have been unprecedented. It shows that lecturers in higher institutions are applying a “first aid” solution by switching entirely from in-person to remote instruction; a move that has been forced upon students by sudden mandatory closures of higher institutions due to COVID-19 pandemic. But the lecturers are quickly realizing that remote learning is just a baby step experiment in the long journey to offering online education that has been conceived as such; which includes effective student engagement tools and lecturer teaching (Akannaso, 2012).

However, a painful and stressful as this COVID-19 period is, it may fashion a long overdue and welcome rebirth of education systems. The pandemic has been a great leveler in a way; giving all stakeholders – educators, students, policy-makers and the society at large in both developed and developing nation like Nigeria, a better understanding of our current education system’s vulnerability and shortcomings. It has underscored how indispensable it is for the population of Nigeria to be digitally literate to function and progress in a world

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in which social distancing, greater digitalization of services and more digitally centered communications may increasingly become the norm (Harkavy, Bergan, Gralleghe & Vant-lan, 2020, April 18th)

COVID-19: Consequences on Higher Institution Students

COVID-19 pandemic has developed service consequences on higher institution students. The loss of several months of schooling has affected the learning outcomes and motivation of students and may result in dropout or changes in career plans. Lower learning outcomes can also have permanent impacts on labour market insertion and outcomes (Hub, 2020, April 9). Also, the success of distance learning programmes as well as the maintenance of social distancing measure depends on the infrastructure and equipment available, as well as on the preparedness of lecturers and students. It is very obvious in Nigeria's education system that the budget allocation to education which is at single digit percentile of national budget as against the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) recommendation of 26 percent is very low such that the needed facilities and structure that could have supported maintenance of social distancing in lecture rooms during lecturers and public address system are in short supply. And this would adversely affect the smooth adherence to the preventive measures of COVID-19 pandemic when school eventually resumes.

The outbreak of Corona Virus has laid bare the digital divide within higher institution in Nigeria between those that have better Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure than others; with some being far better equipped and experienced than others, between students within the same institutions; the rich who live in urban areas and the poor living in rural communities who can barely afford to access the internet where it is available. Truth is that Corona Virus Pandemic has challenged managements of higher education institutions in Nigeria to quickly improve and maximize their ICT operations. However, majority of the higher education institutions do not have the financial and manpower capacity to fully deliver whole programmes online. It is a few open universities that have the capacity. But their targets are mostly mature students; those in employment and those wishing to upgrade their qualifications and recently, fresh school leavers.

Although there are significant number of Nigeria's higher education institutions implementing blended learning; a mixture of face-to-face and online teaching and learning in order to increase access and improve learning outcomes, hardly any has intentions for face-to-face delivery to be completely replaced. This is because reversing from conventional teaching and learning method to online abruptly will certainly affect some students. Many Nigerian students may not return to the classrooms after COVID-19 pandemic. This will obviously increase the number of out of school youths. Female

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students may be disproportionate among the dropouts; thereby halting progress the Nigerian governments have made over the years in addressing gender disparities in higher education (Hub, 2020, April 9). It would be a fallacy to believe that online teaching and learning can be effective by merely posting a lecturer's notes online or having a video recording of the lecturer. Yet, this is what is generally happening at this COVID-19 pandemic period. As aptly noted by Hinson (2020, June, 4) experience has shown that quality online teaching and learning requires that the teaching materials is prepared by professional instructional designers, that the lecturer is pedagogically trained for delivering the programme and the students are equally exposed to the pedagogy of online learning. The authors added that unprepared online lecture delivery could have an impact on quality of programmes and this is unfortunate at a time when significant achievements have been made in improving the quality of teaching and learning in Nigeria's higher education institutions.

Threat to Science and Technology

The worst affected programmes during COVID-19 period of online teaching and learning is science and technology as students are unable to access laboratories for their practicals. Yet, science and technology programmes according to Ekpo (2007) are the ones that are most important to propel Nigeria's development. How can higher education institutions find alternative approaches to using laboratories and how can they mitigate the consequences of poor-quality programmes as a result of unplanned online delivery? In order to improve the research output from Africa generally, a plethora of initiatives and projects have been initiated over the last three decades at national, regional or continental level. According to Hinson (2020, June 4), the emphasis has been on increasing post graduate training, especially at doctoral level and facilitating research projects in higher education institutions with an emphasis on areas which are of priority to the development of Africa. And the bulk of the research initiatives are funded by European countries and by agencies and foundations in the United States, and lately by China where COVID-19 originated. In Africa, there are very few national agencies funding research and hardly any regional or continental ones. Also, almost all the research is undertaken in collaboration with higher education institutions in these foreign countries. As COVID-19 is impacting the whole world, Europe, the United States of America and China appear to be the hardest hit. Can Africa countries generally and Nigeria in particularly continue to rely on research funding from these sources? Several of these foreign countries will probably end up in recession and their higher education institutions will understandably give priority to redressing their own situation rather than supporting international research collaboration. Worthy of mention also is the challenge of graduate unemployment. According to Uya (2009), it has been noted by employers of labour that the major cause of unemployment, is

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the lack of “soft skills” in Nigerian graduates; poor communication skills, lack of personal initiative, inability to work in a team, etc. The wide use of online teaching and learning because of COVID-19 will undoubtedly increase the situation as students are working on their own. Here is an opportunity to actively involve employers to assist in providing the skills they need. It is rather unfortunate that for economic reasons, many potential private employers of graduates may be forced to lay off their staff; thus increasing graduate unemployment. The social and political consequences of large-scale unemployment, especially among educated Nigerian youth will be alarming for Nigeria.

Poor physical structures and facilities also add to the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic. At single digit percentile of national budget to education as against UNESCO’S 26 percent, the funding figures for education in the last three decades explain the poverty of higher education institutions and the dip in standards. Mostly affected are infrastructure (lecturer theaters, power and water resources); knowledge facilities (library accession and teaching aids) and research funding. Yet, in spite of poor funding and its negative consequences, the population of students in higher education institutions for the last three decades has grown exponentially, leading to strain on dilapidated structures and facilities. As students’ population outstripped available lecturer spaces, laboratories and teaching resources, the problem of observing COVID-19 protocols; particularly physical distancing stare higher education institutions in the face. The Chief Executive Officer and director of the Nigeria Center for Disease control (NCDC) Dr. Chikwe Ihekweazu in an interview with the Guardian (2020, July 18) revealed that “the Corona virus is now in a community stage in Nigeria”. Here lies the major challenge of protecting the health of students, lecturers and support staff in higher education institutions in Nigeria.

The Way Forward

The above-listed problems inherent in the management of higher education institutions during and after COVID-19 pandemic could be summarized into financial, sociological, administrative, infrastructural and human perspectives. These are otherwise presented as national attitudes to emergency situations, death of requisite resources and management problem. To this end, the following are proffered as recommendations for the way forward.

1. There is need to prioritize students, lecturers and support staff health, safety and well being.
2. Federal and state governments should give lecturers socio-emotional support to face extra pressure put on them to deliver learning during and after the pandemic.
3. Federal and state governments should provide extra sanitary measures in higher education institutions before schools reopens.
4. There is need to set or scale-up distance learning platforms through traditional media such as TV and radio and provide adequate professional support and training for

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lecturers and support staff. Lecturers and other education personnel need access to relevant, quality professional development and supporting during the corona virus pandemic. Curricula, quality assurance measures, assessment and certification for distance and open programme which will still be relevant even after the pandemic should be developed.

Equity should be put at the heart of education responses during the pandemic. This implies that lecturers and support staff must be included in all aid responses. Employment and wages of lecturers and support staff should be preserved. COVID-19 pandemic cannot be a pretext to lower standards and norms or push aside labour rights. The salaries and benefits of the lecturers and support staff must be preserved.

Conclusion

This paper considered learning and health challenges posed by the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic on higher education institutions in Nigeria. It has observed that response to such emergency situations in Nigeria, historically has often proved unsuccessful. The successive failure of such responses is usually not because of want of ideas but on funding shortages, the negative influence of a corruptive and valuables political system, planning and implementation problems. It therefore offers comments as to the ways of intervening and storming the tide of failure in the case of the dreaded corona virus pandemic. The comments are made strong in the need to guard against unintended problems by being alert to such. In the paper, we acknowledged that the problems that often bedevil achievement of success in emergency programmers in Nigeria which may equally apply to COVID-19 pandemic all have been human connections. Recommendations have therefore been that should be adhered to by the human operators of the Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19. Such adherence would provide solutions to teaching and learning even after the corona virus pandemic.

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