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

MOVING FORWARD: COVID-19 REALITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

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Abstract
The deadly coronavirus has held the world in its grip for the major part of 2020. As the world scrambled to check it's spread, schools have been shut down to reduce person to person transmission. This has taken a tremendous toll on Higher Education, causing millions of students across the globe to lose valuable school years, while worsening the educational inequality between the rich and the poor. This work adopted the qualitative research methodology in reviewing existing literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the African Higher Education Model. The paper examined the African Education Model in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, critically appraising the challenges faced by the Residential Model, the most common system. The paper proposes a two-pronged approach of creation of a hybrid model of Residential-Remote Education while providing new infrastructures and upgrading existing facilities.

Key Words: COVID-19, Higher Education, Residential model, Remote Education, Infrastructure

Introduction

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus in December 2019 and its subsequent spread to every corner of the world took the world by surprise. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30, 2020 and later as a Pandemic on March 11, 2020. Response measures to curtail the spread of COVID-19 led to disruption of activities including education, and even brought them to a virtual standstill (WTO, 2020). A United Nations policy brief released in August 2020 stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190

countries and all continents (UN, 2020). Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world's student population, up to 99 per cent in low and lower-middle income countries (UN, 2020). The implications of this disruption are grave and far-reaching.

The goals and aspirations of students have been paused or suspended. It is also likely that unoccupied youth energy may be diverted to nefarious activities and may be linked to increases in crime and violence. Given these disruptions to economic activities imposed by COVID-19, students from poor homes or students with financial constraints are likely to drop out completely. The most common method of Higher Education in Africa, the Residential model is ill-equipped to cope with the dynamics introduced by the global pandemic. The focus of the system on one-on-one interactions coupled with the glaring lack of facilities and absence of hygienic conditions makes the residential model highly unprepared for the post COVID-19 Era.

Conceptual Framework

The Concept of Higher Education in Africa
The history of Higher Education in Africa is inexorably tied to the colonial powers that laid claim to different swaths of the continent and proclaimed such overseas colonies of their respective countries. In Nigeria, the creation of the Yaba College of Technology in 1934 and the University College, Ibadan (modeled after University College, London) in 1948 by the British Administration in Nigeria kick started Higher Education in the country (Jaja, 2013). Since then, the proliferation of higher institutions and the demand for the education imparted have steadily been on the rise. Jaja (2013) categorized Higher Education as referring to 'the western type of education which is organized after college education.' From the above definition, it can be adduced that the form of education referred to is exclusive to the universities and other institutions of higher learning.

Deriving from the type bequeathed by the colonial powers, the most common model of Higher Education on the continent is the Residential model. Asare (2014) citing McFarlane (2011) and Shannon (2009) described this form of education as face-to-face, brick-and-mortar, conventional, walled, on-campus, or residential institutions. Asare (2014) went on to describe these institutions as those that have physical locations for interaction between teachers and students as well as other resources to facilitate teaching and learning for the students. Further, the Education Encyclopedia describes institutions that employ the Residential method of education as those that "houses most of its students on-campus as opposed to an institution with a large commuter or off-campus population" (Encyclopedia of Education, 2003).

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A close examination of the trend in Africa will reveal that the majority of parents and youths alike strongly believe that the acquisition of higher education is a prerequisite for success in life. This is corroborated by the number of youths who seek admission into institutions of higher learning annually. For example, in Nigeria, an average of one million youths sought admission into Universities, Polytechnics, Monotechnics and Colleges of Education during a nine-year period (Ojerinde 2011). This year, over 1.9 million students sat for the 2020 UTME examinations in Nigeria, the qualifying exam for admissions into tertiary institutions in the country (Vanguard Newspaper, 26th March, 2020). This is against the backdrop of limited spaces. Less than 500,000 were admitted the previous year (SaharaReporters, September 9, 2019). Thus, the pursuit of Higher Education is seen as a must for every young person, and often as a reflection of the seriousness or otherwise of the parents or guardians.

Higher Education Model in Africa in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic
The COVID-19 pandemic thoroughly exposed the sorry state of infrastructure in Higher Institutions across Africa. It brought to fore the deplorable conditions of the facilities on many campuses. In Nigeria, like many other African countries, Higher Institutions battle with the twin problem of decaying and inadequate facilities. The carrying capacity of many Institutions is overstretched. This is often seen in overcrowded classrooms and below par hostel accommodations. According to an article in World Education News + Reviews, present capacity shortages in Nigeria are so severe that less than 40 percent of university applicants gain admission, effectively locking out one million aspiring students each year. The situation is not so different in Ghana. Badu et al (2018) speaking about the conditions in Ghanaian Tertiary Institutions, lamented the slow rate of providing facilities to universities and polytechnics which has resulted in limited teaching and learning facilities for training the country's much needed human resources. The report went on to state that student intake at various tertiary institutions was not possible because the available infrastructure could not accommodate the students, even though they qualify. A 2011 World Bank Report, stated that the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at tertiary institutions that used to be as low as three per cent in 2002/2003 has increased to nine percent in 2009 (World Bank, 2011). The substantial increase in the number of students at tertiary institutions has led to congestion and deterioration of infrastructure and a decline in quality. The World Bank report concluded that the implication of this observed deterioration is that infrastructure in tertiary institutions is woefully inadequate.

The above scenario against the backdrop of the mode of transmission of the dreaded virus shows that the campuses across Africa are a veritable minefield. The two most important conditions for its transmission are unhygienic conditions and crowded spaces. These two ingredients are unfortunately a common sight in the majority of university campuses across

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Africa. It would therefore be irresponsible for the schools to be reopened without finding a solution to these problems. It therefore came as no surprise when tertiary institutions across Africa were closed following the outbreak of the pandemic. For example, Ghana shut down all schools on March 16, 2020, which affected 500,000 students in Higher Institutions according to the Ghana Education Service (COVID-19 Coordinated Education Response Plan for Ghana). Uganda announced the closure of all schools, including its 3,013 Institutions of Higher Learning, on March 20, 2020 forcing 311,556 students out of school (Ministry of Education and Sport, The Republic of Uganda). Nigeria followed suit with the closure of all schools on March 23, 2020 (NUC, 2020). The closure of schools has resulted in the interruption of learning for millions of students across Africa.

This unexpected event has sent shockwaves to the very core of Higher Education in Africa, rocking it to its very foundation.

Methods
This work is a qualitative analysis of existing literature; published articles, books and web resources. The article used secondary research methodology to synthesize the impact of COVID-19 on the Residential Education in Africa and the fallouts. The paper also sheds insight on how opportunities embedded in the challenges can be harnessed to chart a way forward for Higher Education in Africa, heralding a new dawn.

Residential System of Education
This mode of Higher Education is by far the most preponderant. While a case can be made for its popularity as being because it is the mode most African countries inherited at Independence, there are obvious reasons that makes it widely acceptable. The Education Encyclopedia lists some of the benefits to students as increases in aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual values; increases in self-concept, intellectual orientation, autonomy, and independence; gains in tolerance, empathy, and interpersonal skills; persistence in college; and degree attainment. It is claimed in literature that the interactions made possible by this mode of education promotes socialization and friendships that are essential for human development and social living, skills that are essential for after-school life (Greenleaf, 2009; Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, 2008; cited by McFarlane, 2011). There have even been claims that the needs of the students can be attended to as valuable clues can be gleaned from various communication modes including body language which will then enable the tutors to make changes to suit students' needs (McFarlane, 2011).

General Perception about Remote/ Distance System of Education in Africa
The Merriam Webster dictionary defined Remote Education or Distance Learning as a method of study where teachers and students do not meet in a classroom but use the

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internet, e-mail, mail etc., to have classes. Butcher & Wilson-Strydom (2013) described Distance Learning Education as processes of education undertaken when teacher(s) and students are separated by physical distance, with teaching and learning frequently mediated by technology or assigned learning material.

Remote Education or Distance Learning is often scoffed at in Africa. There is the apathy about the worth of the whole educational experience. Trines (2018) submitted that Remote or online education is often 'criticized as an inferior form of education providing an isolated learning experience at best'. Writing in a similar vein, Larbi-Apau et al (2020) submitted that before the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana, many institutional leaders did not believe in online learning and went further, not only to deny the appointments of academic faculty with online degrees, but also refused to recognize online empirical-based publications that were submitted for promotions. Against this backdrop of disdain, it comes as no surprise that this form of education is considered as the option of last resort for many.

Challenges Arising
The public health concern coupled with the lack of facilities to ensure safety of students, teachers and other supporting staff has forced a disruption of academic activities across most universities, with the majority still lacking definite plans for reopening. This has literally placed the lives of the students on hold and effectively stopped learning and the accompanying assimilation of skills needed for life. (Edward, Kissi, Boateng, & Antwi-Afari, 2018).) A closely related fallout is the likely increase in dropout rates. Many students that were facing financial challenges prior to the pandemic may completely drop out before resumption of academic activities. The United Nations estimated that some 23.8 million additional students, from primary to tertiary level, may drop out or not have access to school next year due to the pandemic's economic impact alone (UN, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and worsened the educational inequality and infrastructural deficit in higher institutions in Nigeria. Uneven access to internet facilities, inadequacies in technologies and insufficient online material for instruction constitute challenges to higher education. For instance, a report from Nigeria said 'only those with access to digital learning resources will keep learning in the comfort of their homes while those without access (the majority) are left behind' (Nairametrics, 2020). This trend, if not checked, has the potentials to further widen the gap between the rich and the poor, and perpetuating poverty for the next generation.

Harnessing the Opportunities Embedded in the Challenges
While the pandemic has raised grave issues that threaten to tear the educational system apart, there are potentials for turning the situation around. Already there have been

heartwarming innovations that show the resilience of the education sector. The pandemic has offered a golden chance to harness the opportunities embedded in the current challenges and lay the groundwork for a new, innovative, effective and modern education sector (World Economic Forum, 2020). A twofold approach is being advocated in this paper. The first approach is the implementation of an innovative model that blends the Residential mode with the Remote learning mode. The second approach is the utilization of this opportunity to upgrade existing infrastructures and procure new ones where necessary. These approaches will be subsequently elaborated on.

Suggestions

Creation of the Residential-Remote Learning Hybrid
Residential-remote learning is a hybrid learning model that incorporates features of both residential and remote learning models and as such retains the advantages of both models. For instance, it is believed that academic integrity is maintained because students are physically present at the schools and their progress and various inputs can be identified and isolated by the tutors in the Residential model of Higher Education (Asare, 2014). There are also obvious advantages to the Remote/ Distance Learning mode of education and it has been well documented in literature. Mihhailova (2006, cited in McFarlane, 2011) posited that e-learning is a flexible, 24-hour, anti-discrimination schooling that affords people of different countries and different walks of life the opportunity to access quality education that they may not have obtained because of location or limited vacancies in on-campus universities. McFarlane (2011) said Remote Learning appeals to the working class who may find it impossible to leave their jobs and responsibilities to attend ground campuses. McFarlane (2011) further stated that virtual schools have economic advantages regarding cost savings that would otherwise be incurred in brick-and-mortar schools through such things as transportation costs, increased opportunity costs, overcrowding, and sometimes negative sharing where high and low achievers are put in the same physical environment. So, an amalgamation of the two models (Residential-remote) will lead to harnessing advantages of the two.

1. Schools and Supervising Ministries and Agencies should in conjunction with technical partners adapt and design a curriculum that is suitable for online learning. The curricula should then be migrated to online platforms custom-made for each Institution.

2. Curriculum planners should design curriculum and curricular activities in such a way that academic activities that do not require mandatory face to face interactions should be migrated to online platforms. Activities like teaching will definitely fall under this category.

3. Other activities like practical, tests and examinations can be staggered by examination bodies and teachers/instructors and school authorities in such a way that will not compromise safety. Fool-proof methods of conducting assessments can be developed and tested.
4. Higher institutions should give students the option of choosing either to pursue their courses exclusively remotely or on-campus.
5. Legislation is required by national and state legislatures to ensure that the dichotomy between residential and remote learners should be eliminated. Legislation is also required to ensure that employers of labour respect both models of learning. They should not be treated as 'part time' students.
6. The Federal Government should actively consider increasing the number of exclusively Virtual Universities, like National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) to complement conventional Institutions.

Procurement of New Infrastructure and Upgrading of Existing Facilities

Adapting education to meet with the challenges imposed by COVID-19 in Africa will require the migration of many aspects of academic activities to online platforms. This requires huge investments in technology, infrastructure and human resources. The following suggestions are proffered.

1. Authorities in charge of higher education such as The National Universities Commission in Nigeria and its counterparts in other African countries should conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to ascertain what students need so that they can access the school's online platforms. These may include laptop computers or tablets, internet connections and so on.

2. Arrangements could be made to either loan or sell the devices to the students at a cheaper rate through the deducted from the school fees staggered over many sessions or semesters as the case may be.

3. The schools can also enter into agreements with telecommunication companies to distribute SIM cards pre-loaded with data for internet connections.

4. Authorities of universities and other higher institutions of education should organize training of tertiary teachers and other staff members in the requisite skills needed for content development and impartation using online platforms.

5. Governments of countries in Africa need to invest in the purchase and installation of equipment needed for transmitting virtual classes to the students. These includes but is not limited to, interactive boards, halls with suitable and sufficient lighting, power supply and reliable internet connections.

6. Special Intervention Fund or stimulus packages to stimulate the education sector should be created by national governments solely for the purpose of addressing the challenges facing Higher Institutions. Grants/loans should be sourced and accessed from Agencies and Development Partners like UNESCO, World Bank, Africa Development Bank (AfDB). The African Union (AU), and other good spirited public and private institutions. The funds can then be utilized to provide the necessary tools to commence online or distance learning

Conclusion

The COVID-19 Pandemic has undoubtedly created many challenges for Higher Education in Africa. The challenges can be turned around and used as a springboard for launching a rebirth of the sector. Adjusting to the realities and adopting a two-pronged approach of creating a new model that incorporates both Residential and Remote models into one system of Education while assiduously working to bridge the infrastructural deficit in sector will go a long way to adjusting to the new normal of the Post-COVID 19 World.

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