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Reflections on University Education in Uganda and the COVID-19 Pandemic Shock

Responses and Lessons Learned

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Abstract

The reflections in this article are drawn from a study “Investing in Data and Evidence to Inform Education Policy in Response to The New Normal Caused by Covid 19 Pandemic in Uganda.” The study investigated how the various education stakeholders fitted into “the new normal” in accordance to the tripartite university roles namely: Teaching and learning, research and Community engagements / networking. A multiple case study approach informed this largely qualitative inquiry. Online interviews, and documentary reviews were used to generate the study narratives. Data analysis followed a more descriptive approach of coding of key words, and phrases in order to pinpoint common responses. Using a reflective approach, the article answers the following questions: How did the various university stakeholders respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic lock down? Are African (Uganda Universities) in particular prepared to positively encounter or take advantage unforeseen shocks? What strategies can we suggest to mitigate the plethora of pedagogical challenges created by the COVID-19 Pandemic shock? What will be the future of University Education after the COVID-19 Pandemic lock down? The implication of the study finding is that there is need to re-evaluate education /university funding as well as the need to integrate blended pedagogy at levels of education in Uganda more especially at university level.

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University Education in Uganda and the COVID-19 Pandemic Shock

Introduction

Almost all universities in Uganda were ill-prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic shock. After two months into the pandemic, it became evident to all education stakeholders that a “new normal” had begun. This new normal would require unconventional approaches to university pedagogy as well as education human resources accountability. In as much as Uganda’s university education largely illustrates the worldwide surge in the liberalization of higher education (Muwagga 2006), the COVID-19 pandemic shock almost rendered it impotent. The country is home to over thirty registered private universities and eleven public universities (National Council for Higher Education [NCHC] 2019). The liberalization of university education in Uganda and its rapid evolution, both horizontally and vertically, created significant challenges. Many of the challenges created by the liberalization of university education in Uganda only became explicit during the COVID-19 lockdown. Almost all private universities in Uganda closed. The closure meant rescinding the employment contracts for both their teaching and nonteaching staff as well as closing all human and non-university activities such as physical and online visibility. Only public universities remained partially active because Uganda government continued paying staff salaries, providing research funding, for example the Makerere University Research and Innovation Fund (MAK-RIF), and providing the internet accessibility. This article reflects on some findings from a research study, “Investing in Data and Evidence to Inform Education Policy in Response to the New Normal Caused by COVID-19 Pandemic in Uganda” (IDEP; MAK-RIF 2020b). The study investigated how the various university education stakeholders responded (or failed to respond) to “the new normal,”

in particular with regard to the tripartite university engagements of pedagogy, community engagements, and research. A multiple case study approach informed this largely qualitative inquiry. Using a reflective approach, we share some of the findings from the interviews with academics from various universities in Uganda that we conducted for this case study. In particular, we reflect on their interviews to explore the following questions: How did the various university stakeholders respond to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown? What strategies can we suggest to mitigate the plethora of pedagogical challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic? What lies ahead for university education in Uganda?

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Universities are micro units in Uganda’s higher education enterprise. “Higher education” is a generic term that refers to institutions that, by definition, offer post-secondary formal education. They range from certificate to degree awarding educational institutions, or level four and above based on the Uganda Higher Education Qualifications Framework (UHEQF 2016). In this article, we limit our focus to universities, defining them as any institution, institute, or center of higher education, other than a tertiary institution that offers courses of study leading to award of certificates, diplomas, degrees, as well as conducts research and provides publishing platforms (UHEQF 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic forced almost all countries across the globe to go into a compulsory lockdown of persons, economies, and all that which defines outdoor human activity. In this article, we refer to the COVID-19 pandemic as a shock because it was abrupt and had all the characteristics of

something that could decimate many sectors of a country's system, with the education sector being one of these. To address the COVID-19 impact on Uganda's education system, the government's curriculum development center, the Uganda National Curriculum Development Centre intervened by 1) developing home learning packages/materials, mainly distributed through newspapers, for elementary children's home schooling; and 2) developing radio and television programs for the candidate classes for elementary and secondary school candidate classes.

Both interventions seemed to have targeted approximately 24 percent of Uganda's urban and peri-urban population, which is home to fewer than 30 percent of the Ugandan people. This meant that the rural population, which is approximately 73.2 percent of the country's population, was left unsupported during the COVID-19 lockdown (MAK-RIF 2020b). The main reason for the rural population's isolation comes from its lack of connection to the national hydro-electricity grid (Hülsen, Koch, and Huth 2016). The lack of electricity and use of cheap short time span solar power sources. Short time span solar power sources are solar panels which cannot generate electricity or be put to use for more than an hour without being recharged. These have hindered effective use of the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown for most rural students. Many university students complained that the solar power sources available to them cannot power a laptop for more than thirty minutes. One university student who lived in the rural area explained the following: "Many of our parents can only afford cheap solar sources these cannot power a laptop for more than thirty minutes and yet work sent by our lecturers may take more than thirty minutes of active computer usage" (MAK-RIF 2020b).

The IDEP report (MAK-RIF 2020b) revealed that rural children at all levels of education in Uganda were abandoned or at least felt neglected. It was also revealed that higher institutions of learning in Uganda lacked a uniform national intervention to ensure that learning and teaching continued during the pandemic. It was assumed that university students were mature enough to attend to their own educational needs during the COVID-19 lockdown. One official from the NCHE, in response to the above assertion, said, "Because we did not have a common strategy for higher education students and staff during the COVID-19 lockdown, approximately only 15 percent of both the rural and urban students combined benefited from various COVID-19 pandemic lockdown interventions." The lack of a common strategy on higher education in Uganda during the COVID-19 lockdown meant that various universities had to struggle on their own to account for their students and staff. All private universities in Uganda depend on student tuition and, in the absence of this tuition, almost every university activity was annihilated by the pandemic lockdown.

Categories of Universities and Their Paradigmatic Anchors

As mentioned earlier, Uganda has both public and private universities with public universities situated in the social-public paradigm. In this article, a paradigm refers to a system or an education organization built on a common set of ideas or standards and in a more expanded form it implies a philosophy guiding a specific educational institution. The social-public paradigm in this article looks at the role of government in the provision of social services education inclusive. It is divided into two subparadigms—the restrictive and liberal

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social-public paradigms. The restrictive/ social paradigm implies that only the government provides university education. The liberal social-public paradigm on the other hand, implies that government accommodates co-sharing in the funding or provision of university education. In Uganda, a public university is a higher education institution that has been established by the Uganda Minister of Education and Sports with approval by Uganda's Parliament under section 22 and is maintained by public funds (UHEQF 2016). On the other hand, private universities in Uganda have diverse paradigmatic pivots; some are purely for-profit whereas others have some social and community dimension, especially those owned by religious organizations and nongovernment organizations (Muwagga 2006).

Challenges in Uganda's University Education System

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, Uganda's education system had some significant challenges. For example, Uganda's university education philosophy is not explicitly known by the majority of Uganda's education stakeholders. An education philosophy pivots on a nation's heritage, values, beliefs, as well as people's perceptions and aspirations for their current and future life, plus the world outlook. Uganda's education system, with its many challenges, such as constrained, underfunding for most of the university programs, as well as an unclear educational philosophy, is like a ship at sea without a compass or satellite. By implication, when the system was struck by COVID-19 pandemic, its lack of navigation devices resulted in it nearly sinking. Almost all private and newly created public universities went totally silent during the lockdown. Makerere University (MAK), for most of the

pandemic lockdown, was the most visible representative of university education in Uganda. In the following sections, we reflect on the various challenges that arose for universities in Uganda during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Teaching and Learning Activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

All universities in Uganda were challenged to effectively carry out teaching and learning during the COVID-19 lockdown. This provision was particularly difficult for the country's private universities, who, to avoid litigation by staff, rescinded employment contracts. For the over thirty universities in the country, the private university terrain in Uganda was almost wiped out during the COVID-19 lockdown. Only public universities remained active, but even then, only MAK remained functional, mainly in research and community engagement. On the other hand, the issues of university pedagogy for all universities, both public and private, remained elusive. The vice chancellor of one private university said: "We do not have money to pay our staff. In which case there is no one to carry out research or teach. We do not even have money to keep our internet servers functional to keep the university visible in the virtual space. Our website is almost going down. What we need now is to secure money and pay our staff as well as re-open the university." It is noted that in Uganda almost all private universities use student fees to cover a significant portion of their annual budgets. In the absence of these fees, their planning ended abruptly—an end that has significant implications for the university financing model in Uganda.

Another pedagogical challenge faced by all universities in Uganda during the pandemic was that they could not fully account for their students, nor reach them via

online modalities. An academic registrar at a public university said, “Many of the students, their telephone contacts are nonfunctional. We have many students who stay in rural areas which are not very accessible or are not fully connected with the national telecommunication grid. In which case if we fully go online these [students] will be disadvantaged and may sue the university for discrimination.” Unlike other universities in the country, MAK, because of Ugandan government and donor funding, was more prepared than other universities. A study on Makerere Undergraduate Students’ e-Learning Readiness revealed that MAK had at least 40 percent of its academic program already online on the Makerere University e-Learning Environment (MUELE; MAK 2020a).

Once it became evident that the country would be in lockdown due to the pandemic, MAK, through its deputy vice chancellor for academic affairs (DVC-AA), instituted a committee to study and immediately roll out e-Learning. The DVC-AA also ensured that MAK’s institute of Open Distance and eLearning immediately began to support the university’s staff to develop their skills to use online and distance education pedagogical approaches. MAK also reactivated its MUELE mobile run by the E-Learning Department in the College of Education and External Studies (CEES). These initiatives encouraged both MAK’s staff and students to maintain an online presence, with all students at MAK also being advised to obtain a university email address. In addition to these activities, MAK’s Directorate of Research and Graduate Training developed the Makerere University Guidelines: Online Research Proposal and Thesis Defense (MAK 2020d) during the lockdown. These guidelines had a tripartite intent: 1) to ensure pedagogic continuity; 2) to enable graduate students to complete their studies; and 3) to allow students to

receive mentoring from the university staff.

Community Outreach and Engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic

MAK also responded to the pandemic through community engagement and research. For example, it established the Makerere University Coronavirus Resource Center, which is a website that seeks to help advance the understanding of the virus, inform the public, and brief policymakers in order to guide a response, improve care, and save lives (MAK 2020b). In addition, the vice chancellor and Makerere University Academic Staff Association (MUASA) mobilized staff to donate to the Ugandan government COVID-19 community fund. In response, MAK collected UGX 85 million (approximately US\$24,000) worth of items to fight the spread of COVID-19. These items include food by MUASA and sanitizers by all staff of MAK. In contrast, as explained by a professor from a private university, such support was difficult to provide because of the financial difficulties private universities experienced at this time: “Makerere University was able to do all that [community outreach] because the staff were being paid a salary as well as allowances from the various donor projects which remained functional. But staff in private universities, the best they can do during this COVID-19 time is to look for food and survival. We cannot think of making contributions to the vulnerable when we, ourselves, are vulnerable. For example, though a professor, I was last paid a full salary three months ago.” MAK’s internet and website remained functional to connect staff with one another, students, and its many international and national collaborators and networks. MAK has signed memorandums with over 200 local and international universities with

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which there has been joint research and collaborations on COVID-19 interventions and pedagogy.

Research and Innovations during the COVID-19 Pandemic

MAK has the highest number of PhD holders, as well as associate, and full professors, in the country (MAK-RIF 2020a). The pandemic acted as a trigger for a massive research initiative at the University with a key question guiding this work: Are African universities, Ugandan universities in particular, prepared to positively encounter or take advantage of unforeseen shocks? The answer lies in the way the different stakeholders behaved during the COVID-19 lockdown. For instance, MAK took advantage of the pandemic to solicit the government for COVID-19 research funding. Using this funding, MAK established the MAK-RIF COVID-19 funding and took a massive leap into research and medical innovations through the MAK-RIF, which awarded 221 researchers and innovators funding to respond to the pandemic (MAK 2020c). These research projects are required to create multiplier effects on staff and the ranking of MAK, as well as promote government policies and agendas. Each research team must have a mix of senior and junior staff totaling no fewer than five team members. As an end product, the study team must have at least two publications in peer-reviewed journals to ensure their findings are disseminated and Makerere's research ranking continues to grow. By implication it is only MAK that was prepared and took advantage of the unforeseen shock with regard to research.

Reflections, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations

Various issues have emerged from the

COVID-19 pandemic regarding the context of Ugandan higher education. Perhaps one of the largest realizations is that the current university funding model in the country resulted in almost all private universities in Uganda not having the financial resources to meet their human and financial obligations. This issue points to a fundamental need going forward: finding an appropriate model for university funding in Uganda. Perhaps one way to build such a model would be to begin building national collaborations between universities, because there has been little collaboration among national universities in the Ugandan university context. Instead, most university collaborations and networking in the country have been with institutions outside of the country (e.g., universities in the United States, China, and various European countries). The lockdown illustrated the need for more collaborations between universities within the country to solve challenges that are more micro in nature, such as limited or no academic research outputs for most private universities in Uganda as a result of a constrained senior academic staff. In this context constrained senior academic staff implies that over 69 percent of Uganda's PhD holders are found in public universities. It also implies that over 80 percent of academic staff at the ranks of Associate Professors and above are found in public universities. National Council for Higher Education (NCHE, 2019). This was further elaborated by the director of graduate training at one of Uganda's public universities explained:

Originally many private universities thought that teaching was the only sure way of sustaining a university, but the COVID-19 lockdown has demystified that. Now private universities have to look for research money and funding

and this can only be done if they ally with the public universities which have more established research structures, such as: research and grants offices, international offices, and have international networks through which they bid for research money from intentional bodies. Public universities are funded by the government, and staff in those universities spend more than 40 percent of the intellectual engagement in research, whereas our staff spend almost all their time in teaching.

Private universities will have to look or think of alternative sources of funding other than student tuition fees. MAK has 80 percent of the country's full professors and senior researchers; private universities could look for means on how to tap these Makerere University professors through staff collaborations as visiting professors in order to mentor their junior staff.

In addition to the need to form these nationally focused collaborations, it has become apparent that online learning for universities in the country is also a needed area of focus. For example, although all universities in Uganda have listed distance education as a key component of their service, it seems that this service was actually not offered. Over 80 percent of Ugandan universities academic programs are not visible on the virtual space; it also seems many universities are not prepared for online teaching and learning, because staff are not well-trained in the use of online teaching and learning resources. Going online is expensive for most private universities, but for public universities, where the bandwidth is small and slow, as well. However, universities must "onlinize" their academic and nonacademic programs if they are to continue to be in

the pedagogy business. COVID-19 has demystified conventional university face-to-face pedagogy for all Ugandan universities. There is a need for blended pedagogy. This blended pedagogy will among others include problem-based learning (PBL). Problem-based learning is a learner-centered pedagogy in which students are sent out in the field or laboratory to study on their own or seek for solutions to the study problems. The blended pedagogy will also among others include: use of mini face-to-face sessions, adoption of non-conventional teaching and learning approaches such as the use of mobile phones and other Digital Education tools for teachers and students such as: the Edmodo which is an educational tool that is used to create a social network of students and teachers. It may also involve use of TED-Ed which is an educational platform that allows creating educational lessons with the collaboration of teachers, and students. The other useful educational tool which the Ugandan universities may adopt is the "Animoto." The Animoto is a digital tool that is used to create high-quality teaching and learning videos in a short time and from any mobile device.

From the study findings, Staff at various universities in the country revealed that the COVID-19 lockdown taught them to adapt as well as realize that e-pedagogy is not limited to computers but mobile phones through mobile apps, like WhatsApp. There is a feeling that the future Ugandan universities might be more skewed to technology in education as opposed to mere educational technology. There is a belief that universities will have to seek for digital solutions for their pedagogy. However, these digital solutions have their challenges, especially in a country where 33,485,078 (73.2 percent) out of the total 45,741,007 estimated population of Uganda live in rural areas (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS] 2019). Uganda's rural

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population is characterized by low access to electricity it is estimated that it is only 18 percent of Uganda's rural population has reliable electricity supply (World Bank 2018). Without reliable electricity most of the students residing in rural areas will not be able to engage in digital pedagogy.

Another important realization from the pandemic is that Ugandan universities, especially the private ones, will have to invest in human resources. Having more senior faculty with the rank of professor will encourage private universities to enter into the national and global funding grids. In addition, universities will have to think of student and staff support centers in case of future lockdowns and crises. There should be no pure private universities; the government, apart from providing the legal frameworks, must rethink the funding of these private universities because the COVID-19 lockdown has shown that there can never be pure private education. Unlike other universities, MAK tried to account for its staff by conducting a study on the "State of Psychosocial Services at MAK," whereas other universities, because of constrained financial resources, dismissed their staff, so they could not account for them. Many began seeking employment in public universities. The implication of this is that universities must invest in staff welfare as well as self-evaluation and assessment.

In conclusion, our reflection on the findings from "Investing in Data and Evidence to Inform Education Policy in Response to the New Normal Caused by Covid 19 Pandemic" demonstrates the need for a fundamental paradigm shift in university pedagogy and funding in Uganda if the country's universities are to withstand future unforeseen shocks. Further reflection on university education in Uganda during the COVID-19 lockdown illustrates the need to reevaluate university education funding

as well as its implied pedagogy. There is need to integrate blended innovative pedagogy at all educational levels in the country, in particular at the university level. In addition, the Ugandan government must rethink its policy on university funding in order to include limited funding for private universities, especially human resources and research at private universities.

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