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COVID-19, DIGITIZATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN AFRICA.

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IN SUMMARY

- Conversations about moving beyond the analogue mode of delivery of higher education are not new in the African higher education context. As such, current conversations about the greater use of ICT triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic would benefit from being placed in the historical context of earlier debates.

- Proposals for the implementation of digital strategies should sufficiently connect higher education institutions to the challenges of their contexts. Key amongst the challenges is the burden of costs and the risk of widening inequality on the higher education landscape.
- COVID-19 puts Africa and its HEIs between a rock and a hard place; to innovate and embrace online learning to survive in the short- and long-term, yet this exacerbates inequalities and puts the transformational goals of higher education at risk.
- The move to leverage technology in teaching will succeed and be sustainable only if it prioritizes (maintains) the transformational goals of higher education and transcend the typical notion of reform.

The onset of COVID-19 in Africa in March 2020 severely disrupted learning in most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and halted collaborations that support innovations in these institutions. The on fall of the pandemic halted the planning of training activities for the Institute for Middle Level Academics within the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, (CODESRIA). These training activities, which aim at promoting innovations in research and teaching, were interrupted (and postponed) in March 2020. Four months down the road, CODESRIA, like many institutions around the world, is exploring alternative ways, including virtual options, of conducting its activities, especially those which involve support to universities. However, a major challenge is the level of preparedness of public universities in Africa, CODESRIA's main constituency, to uptake virtual activities, even as calls for a transition to online teaching continue to increase.

Admittedly, universities in Africa are struggling to adapt to the disruptions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic for many reasons which have already been

flagged in [previous op-eds](#) under the African Leadership Centre's Op-ed Series. Most public universities suffer from structural limitations which are linked to inadequate funding, infrastructure decay and sustained under-investment, many of which are legacies of the economic downturn which hit most African countries in the 1980s. Most public universities have not fully recovered from the ravaging impacts of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). The financial challenges and brain drain that followed the SAPs triggered a qualitative decline in higher education across Africa which remains until today. Operating at less than maximum capacity, most of the universities in Africa continue to struggle with keeping pace with changes brought by globalization, including the digitization of higher education.

A quick survey of public universities across a number of African countries will reveal the lack of Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure, funding challenges and bureaucratic and embedded leadership problems that curtail innovation in these institutions. Despite these seemingly insurmountable challenges, many public institutions of higher learning have continued to expand and undergo reform processes, influenced by both global trends and the pressure of national processes. In fact, the last two decades have witnessed a surge in the demand for higher education across Africa, occasioned by a burgeoning youth bulge. Many public universities have advanced the need for the greater use of digital technologies as a way of coping with the ever-increasing enrollment numbers while still providing quality education.

This is to make the point that current conversations about the need to transcend the analogue mode of delivery of higher education are not exactly new in the African higher education context. Debates on the increased use and leveraging of ICT in higher education in Africa existed well before the onset of COVID-19. African HEIs have over the years made attempts to innovate and improve the quality of education and its delivery using ICTs, even within the context of

shrinking funding for public universities. Tade Aina captures it succinctly that, 'when one takes a look at the Higher Education sphere in Africa, the dominant theme seems to be one of constant [reform](#).' A number of public HEIs in Africa were truly on the way towards the greater use of ICT in both teaching and administration in the period leading to March 2020. As such, COVID-19 and its disruptions happened in the midst of these conversations and preliminary efforts at up-scaling the use of ICT in public HEIs in Africa.

Current conversations about greater use of ICT triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic would thus benefit from being placed in the historical context of earlier conversations. This would center the conversation on the preliminary efforts which have been made and the challenges encountered, in order to minimise the drawbacks that could accompany a move towards greater use of ICT. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has given a new impetus to these conversations and birthed a new sense of urgency about transcending analogue modes of delivery which hasn't given room for these considerations.

Several stakeholders and partners in the African higher education sector, including national policy makers, [UNESCO](#) and academics, have proposed [a fast-tracked move towards online learning](#) as an immediate and long-term response strategy to COVID-19 and other potential pandemics in the future. Many universities on the continent have thus attempted a shift to online education without sufficient [preparation](#) or varied levels of adaptation. Initial feedback from these experiences indicate that public HEIs across Africa face multiple challenges in their efforts to adapt to online learning, thus underscoring some of the issues flagged in pre-COVID-19 conversations about the use of ICTs in HEIs.

Some of these concerns include requisite sustainable implementation of the 'reform' agenda; the need to contextualize proposed reforms in the national and institutional realities and peculiarities of each HEI, and the need for quality

assurance while enabling equal access for all students. Most HEIs across the continent do not yet possess sufficient technological and technical infrastructure to support online learning, especially given their large student numbers. In addition, recurrent costs such as internet service provision and maintenance could further put additional resource strain on an already limited financial base. While internet prices may be dropping globally, they are not dropping fast enough in [Africa](#), and in ways that support expanded use and access to online teaching. The reality remains that internet users across the continent pay the [highest](#) prices for mobile data relative to the average monthly income in the world. A similar theme exists for voice packages too, as the International Telecommunication Union report shows that Africans also pay the highest prices for mobile voice calls.

Related to cost is the issue of inequality. A major digital migration in HEIs would imply that all students would need to either own or be able to regularly access a computer (or other access platforms) which is a challenge for students from poorer backgrounds, especially in rural areas. This would vitiate the equilibrium (bridging of social classes) potentials and transformational promise of higher education. Proposals for the implementation of digital strategies should thus sufficiently connect the institutions to the challenges of their contexts.

[Taru Josiah, a lecturer at a university in Zimbabwe](#), shared his university's experience with online teaching in an article which was published in the Corona Times Blog. His university, like many other universities across Africa, decided to minimize disruptions by moving to online teaching. However, the challenges have been enormous, and straddle wider societal inequalities which are linked to class, gender and even race. In his case, most of the students in his university (which is in rural Zimbabwe) do not own a personal laptop that can enable them to participate in online teaching. In one class, for example, only 2 out of 150 students were able to connect on google classroom following the migration to

online teaching. What Taru terms a 'digital tragedy' in Zimbabwe equally applies to many other African universities which are shifting to online learning.

The move to online delivery may also exacerbate barriers to women's advancement in higher education. [Women, and particularly](#) those of color, face peculiar challenges in academia that are discussed in the work 'Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia' by Gabriella Gutiérrez, *et al.* The volume sheds light on how race and gender affect women of color in hiring and promotion in HEIs. While many of the essays in the volume address the struggles of women in academia in the Global North, the reality is similar in many countries in the Global South where the pandemic threatens to widen the gender gap in academia.

Despite these challenges, debates on whether universities in Africa should move significant parts of their educational processes online were pre-Covid-19 luxuries that the continent cannot afford, as the pandemic drags on. HEIs in Africa are clearly coming [to terms with the new](#) reality, a new 'global education order' of integrating online teaching and learning. But as the situation in Zimbabwe reveals, digital learning is a hydra-headed monster; it can contribute to improved quality and overall innovation in education, but on the flip side, it can exacerbate inequalities in ways that undercut the transformational goals (for individuals and society at large) of higher education. Because of this, there exists an urgent need to ensure that the ongoing transition to digital learning does not leave anyone behind. In order to achieve this enormous goal, there is need to address the structural inequalities in access to digital tools and to the skills required to use them effectively. The move to leverage technology in teaching will succeed and be sustainable only if it prioritizes (maintains) the transformational goals of higher education and transcend the typical notion of reform.

Overall, COVID-19 puts Africa and its HEIs between a rock and a hard place; to innovate and embrace online learning to survive in the short- and long-term, yet this exacerbates inequalities and puts the transformational goals of higher education at risk. Still, online learning is inevitable for HEIs in Africa in the short and long-term, key questions lie in the 'how' and 'process' issues to avoid the highlighted challenges. Perhaps the adaptation to digital learning goes beyond HEIs alone; they are new national 'emergencies', a new nation building project. Reframing the move to digital learning in HEIs as a national, developmental imperative could change the debate. This would ensure the appropriate contextualization of the education reform (digitalization) agenda within the peculiarities of each institution, country and even region. It could also unlock the much needed investments, and more importantly the pivotal partnerships and collaborations between public and private sectors, within and between HEIs across Africa, local and international stakeholders, and education and technological sectors. COVID-19 imposes a moment of change on HEIs in Africa with inherent opportunities to address age-old challenges.

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