



Impacts of the COVID-19 Disruptions on Institutions of Higher Education in Uganda

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Executive Summary

This policy brief gives a short overview of the disruptions of the COVID-19-driven school closures on Institutions of Higher Education (IHE's) in Uganda. Nearly 170,000 tertiary institution students are at home facing uncertainty not only about their family financial situations but also about their academic future. We surveyed 427 students in IHE's to find out their perceptions of the impact of school closures on their learning experiences and found that 92% of the students had continued studying albeit by self-initiative. Only 16% of the students were constantly in touch with their lecturers and only 16.5% of the students had access to online learning platforms. The respondents also expressed the challenges faced during the COVID-19 lockdown, the biggest of which was being able to continue their studies fairly normally. The obvious learning losses suffered by these students may in some way never be recovered. The government and all relevant stakeholders have to come together to find the most appropriate ways of going forward. In this study, students give voice to their recommendations most of which turn towards blended learning. We further explore strategies for a new learning system that has the potential to be a game-changer in the country's education system. A new normal is being planned for and will start being implemented sooner than later. This new system should be more effective at education delivery, be inclusive of marginalized groups, and yet must also be affordable to the students. Furthermore, all this must be carried out in such a way that the standard health measures can be easily enforced. The results of carefully planned policy measures would greatly help in recouping the learning losses suffered during this pandemic and would make great strides in filling historical gaps in literacy rates.

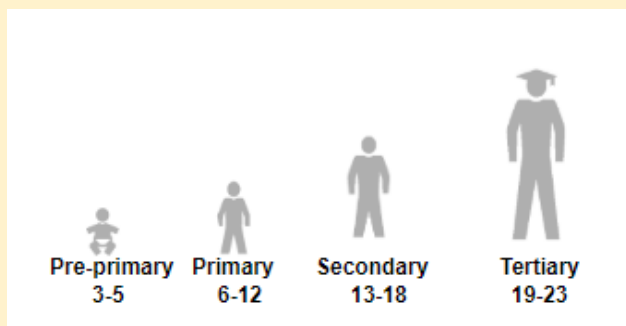
Global impacts of COVID 19 on Higher Education

World over, schools have shut down temporarily because of the COVID-19 pandemic. An estimated 220 million tertiary students have had their learning disrupted globally.¹ As a result, countries in the Global North have taken to online classes which have ensured continuity of their education programs. It is the countries in the Global South that have faced the greatest disruptions including some instances of the total stalling of education delivery.

In history, previous pandemics also spurred changes in several systems including the way teaching was conducted, all these changes gradually led us to where we are today.² The COVID-19 pandemic has caused great disruptions, the recovery from which new insights and perhaps will allow better systems to evolve.

Higher Education in Uganda

Uganda has over 45 million citizens whose median age is 16.7 years,² it is safe to say the majority of Ugandan's are youth with over 7 million aged 15-24.⁴ The average age range of Ugandan students in higher education is 19-23.³



Source: UNICEF

In Uganda, Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) are centrally regulated under an umbrella governing body that falls under the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES)-The National Council for Higher Education. Uganda currently has 258 IHEs⁴ which teach about 165,396 students as of 2020.⁵



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Coronavirus Disease in Uganda

Although the first COVID-19 case was registered on 22 March 2020, this had already been preceded by the President's directive to put in place preventive measures which included the shutting down of schools and mass gatherings. The number of infections has continued to rise. As of 30th June, Uganda had registered over 870 cases of COVID-19⁸, this number continues to rise by the day.

Ministry of Education and Sports' Responses

The MoES's response to the schools' shutdown focused on trying to ensure continued students' learning within their homes, in hope that learning would resume as before when the spread of COVID-19 is under control.



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This originally permitted IHEs to conduct long-distance modes of instruction through whatever means

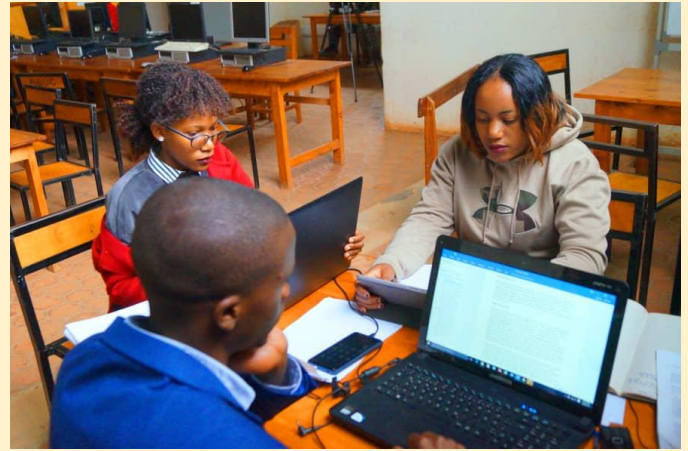
they could harness. Most gave their students take home hard copy notes, a few others provided online platforms to teach students, and a few IHEs like Uganda Christian University (UCU), the Law Development Center (LDC), Cavendish University, and East African Virtual University utilized their pre-existing e-learning platforms.

On 30th March, an anonymous Uganda Christian University (UCU) student drafted an online petition—that got 50 signatures—asking that the take-home exams as organized by UCU be suspended,⁹ a counter-petition with over 2,000 signatures asking that the take-home exams be allowed, drafted by Henry Martin, also a UCU student, soon followed.⁷

The MoES proceeded to ban all online exams so that all institutions would remain on equal footing.⁸ This was in a bid to reduce learning inequality within the country as the majority of the students do not have access to online exams and even the necessary facilities to do them. It was also a major setback for the well-prepared institutions.

The President, in his Eighth Presidential Address, declared that schools would remain closed until further notice.¹² Radios were planned to be distributed to every household in the country in a bid to promote remote learning.

In the meantime, the Government of Uganda (GoU), MoES, and all schools are planning on new teaching approaches that will efficiently meet the students' learning needs while maintaining health and safety standards during and after this pandemic.



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Impacts on Institutions and Responses

All schools and the majority of tertiary institutions and Universities complied with the President's safety directive to close temporarily on 20th March 2020, at the onset of COVID-19 infections in Uganda.

Of all the universities in Uganda, five are public whereas 27 are private. All the public universities and IHE have been buffered from the dire financial consequences of school closure because they have the governments' backing financially. It is the private universities and institutions which chiefly depend on tuition fees that have faced the heaviest financial blows from this disruption.

As a result of decreased cash-inflows, some universities have suspended employee contracts and some have even laid off a number of their workers in a bid to stay financially afloat. This has caused uncertainty as well as financial and mental distress on IHE staff and lecturers.

In addition to this, new enrollments have fallen sharply. According to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic Affairs at UCU, UCU has registered as few as 20% of their usual number of students applying for admission during the school closure. The sharp drop in new enrollments throughout the IHEs could be accounted for by the school closures and the uncertainty about when schools will re-open.

Impacts on Students and Responses

Students, the main beneficiaries of education, have faced major disruptions, some of which are irreversible. Many had their learning totally stalled, and thus they have lost valuable learning time. However, a few had some form of continued learning, typically either through course handouts given at the onset of closures or on-line platforms.

Most students have uncertainty about what the academic year will look like and also whether they will be able to make up for the lost time.

Additionally, most students have lost access to the vast social interactions and psychological support that school settings provide, including their friends, teams, and clubs. This could lead to loneliness, or even depression, especially when their own homes are not socially healthy environments.

The lockdown saw a drastic increase in the instances of domestic violence in homes.⁹ Women and girls are the most vulnerable in instances of domestic violence,¹⁰ and all children who live in homes ridden with domestic violence suffer mental and physical trauma whose negative effects are unquantifiable.¹²



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Increased school dropouts are expected after schools reopen, especially from students with unstable

financial backgrounds. This is a dilemma that is expected in all levels of education. Students whose parents have lost their sources of income are in even worse states because, post lockdown, they will have little money for their children to return to school. The students will suffer if their parents cannot afford to take them to school.

There will also be some long-run impacts of these COVID-driven disruptions:

Increased school dropouts in the near future of students who have become pregnant, been married off, or whose parents have failed to raise tuition fees, etc. may lead to higher inequalities in the future. Those who continue with their education will be able to do well in life while their dropout counterparts will have regressed into living unproductively.

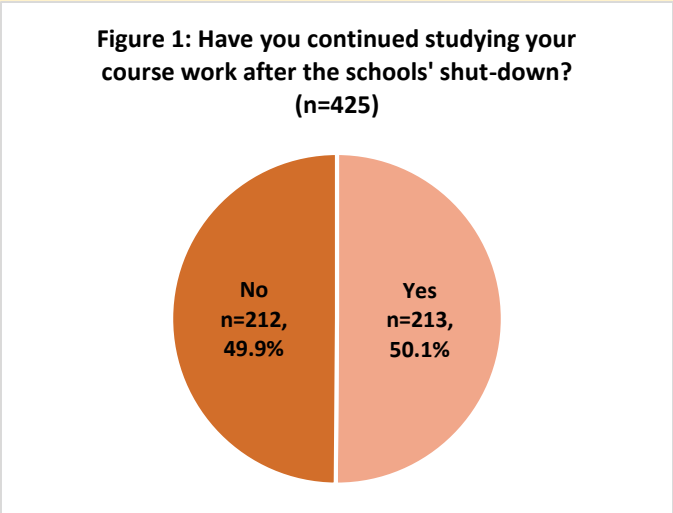
The increased school dropouts would also lead to a reduced contribution to the economy, lost potential taxes and expenditure from those who dropped out, lost research and innovation gaps in the areas that would have benefitted from the school completion of these dropouts.¹

Another issue is the reality of international students stuck in Uganda. Many international students were unable to return home after schools were abruptly closed due to the closure of the airport and public transport being suspended. This left the international students with only one option: staying in Uganda in their hostels or host homes. This is quite strenuous for these students as they are physically apart from their families. For, example, UCU had to accommodate, provide meals, and other conveniences to international students at the cost of 12,000Shs per day.

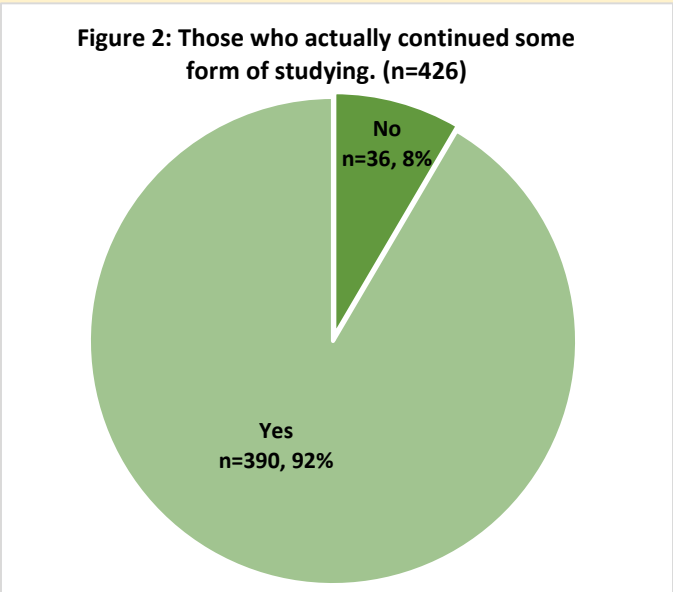
APC designed and sent out a survey on students' perceptions of the schools' shutdown on their learning experience. It aimed at assessing the reactions of IHE students towards several aspects of learning during the lockdown. Below are the major findings from 426 respondents - all students enrolled in Ugandan IHEs -

the majority of whom are male (54.6%) and the majority of whom are aged 21-25 years (65.2%):

Exactly half, 50%, of the respondents, said they had continued learning after the lockdown as shown in Figure 1 below.

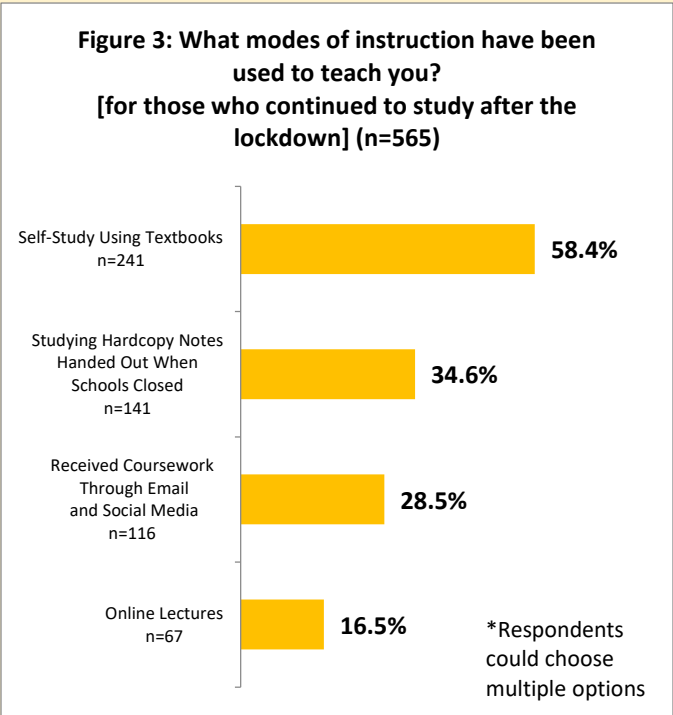


However, some of these who did not continue receiving instruction from their lecturers decided to instead engage in self-study, using textbooks, etc. This brought the actual number of academically idle students to a much smaller percentage as seen in Figure 2 below.

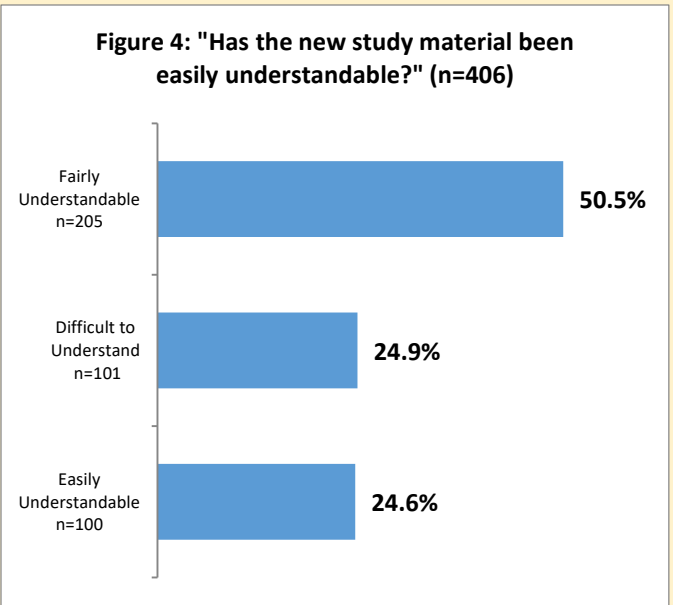


Of these who had continued to study, 58.4% did so by self-initiative, using with textbooks and other resources. Another 34.6% studied hardcopy notes that

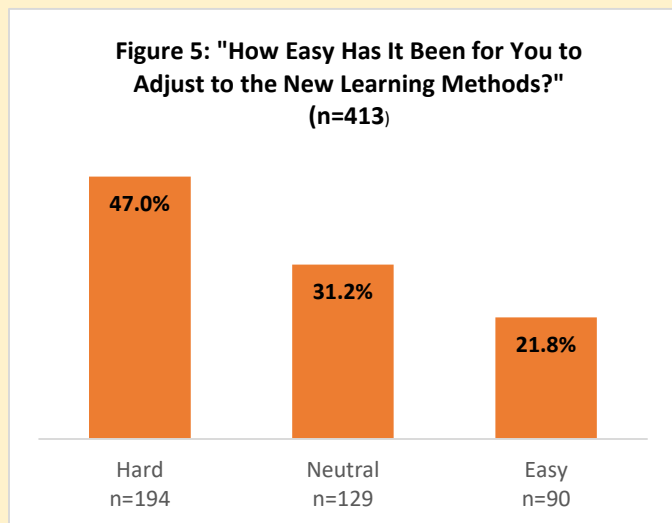
had been handed out at the onset of the schools' closure while 28.5% of the students received coursework through e-mail and social media. Only 16.5% received online lectures. Below is Figure 3 depicting these results:



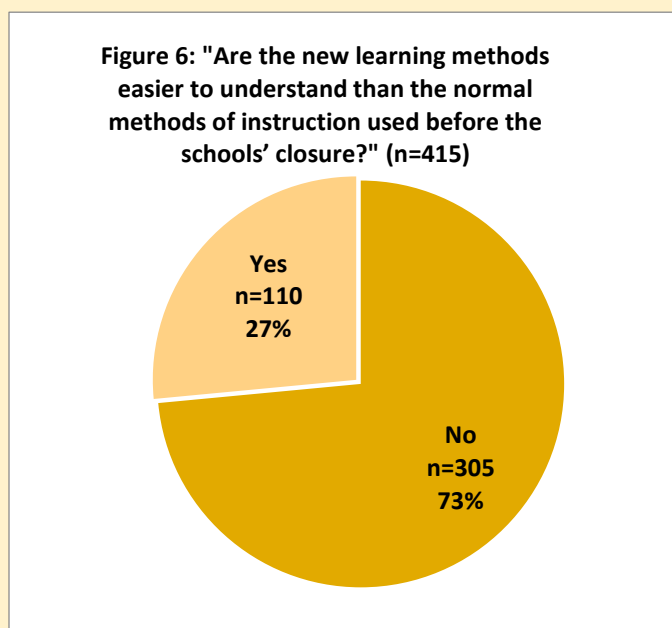
On ease of assimilation of knowledge, for these who continued to study, the majority, 50.5%, found the material just fairly understandable. 24.9% said it was hard to understand and only 24.6% found it easy to understand, as shown in Figure 4 below.



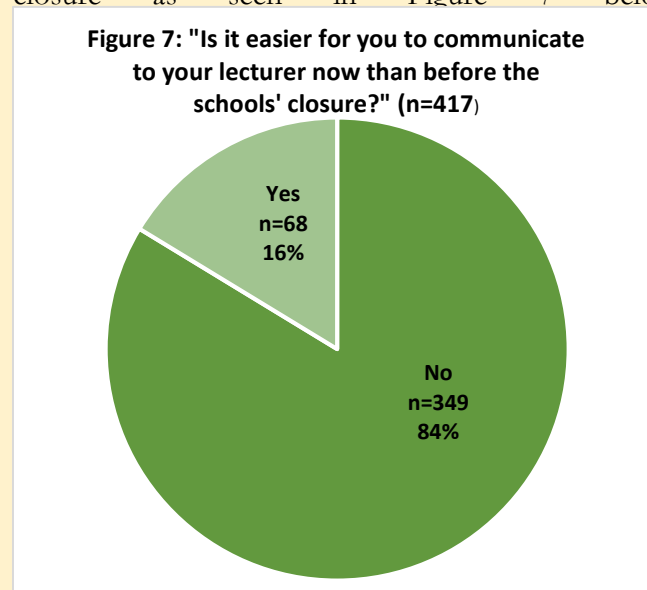
As for ease of adjustment to the new learning methods, 47% of respondents found it very hard to adjust to the new learning methods while another 31.2% found it neutral. Only 21.8% found it easy to adjust to new learning methods. This was done on a linear scale of 1-5, 1 being 'very hard' and 5 being 'very easy'. The results are shown in figure 5 below.



On comparisons of learning methods, when compared to the old-normal way of learning, the majority of the students, 73%, found the new learning methods harder than the old-normal, as shown in Figure 6 below.

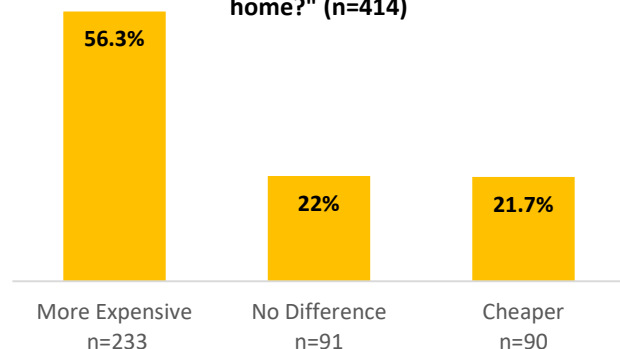


On communication changes with their lecturers, the majority of the students, 83.7%, found it harder to communicate with their lectures during the school closure as seen in Figure 7 below.



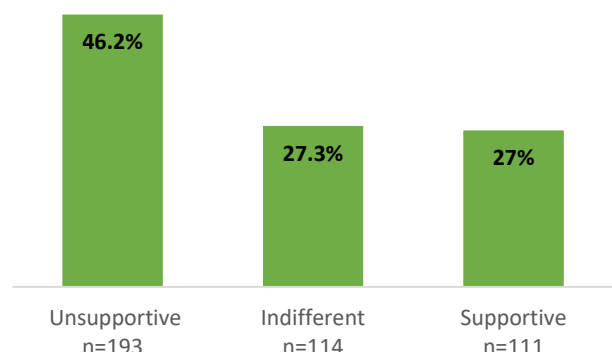
With regards to changes in learning costs, the highest number of students, 38.2%, found the new costs of learning much more expensive than before while 18.1% found the costs slightly more expensive. A possible explanation for this is the cost of internet access. Only 12.6% found the costs of learning much cheaper while 9.2% found the costs just slightly cheaper. 22% found no difference in the costs of learning. This was also a linear scale of 1-5, with 1 being 'much more expensive' and 5 being 'much cheaper'. The average score here is 2.4, fairly more expensive. Below is figure 8 showing these results in which the more expensive costs are merged while the cheaper costs are merged:

Figure 8: "How have the costs of learning changed for you now that you are staying at home?" (n=414)



On how supportive their home environments have been towards their studies, an appalling 26.6%, or a little over one out of four, found their homes very unsupportive while 19.6% found their homes unsupportive. Another 27.3% found their homes indifferent. Only 15.6% found their homes very supportive while 11% found their homes fairly supportive. The average score on a scale of 1 to 5 - where 1 is for very unsupportive and 5 is very supportive- was 2.6, slightly worse than indifferent. The results are shown in figure 9 below with the supportive categories merged and the unsupportive categories merged.

Figure 9: "How supportive has your home environment been towards your continued education during the schools' shut-down?" (n=418)

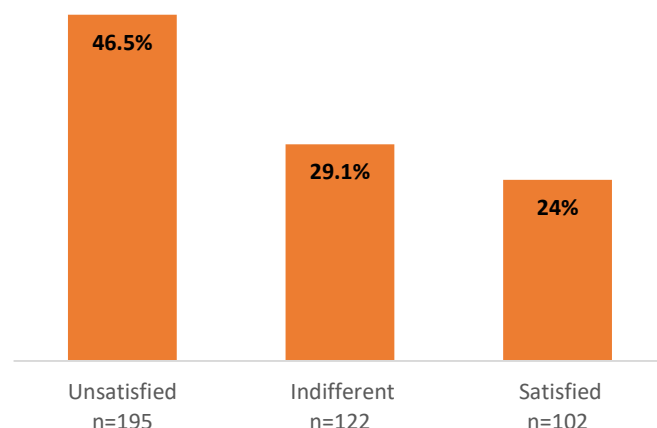


Asked what modes of instruction students would prefer when schools resumed, the majority, 74.2%, preferred in-class lectures, 32% preferred online

lectures, and 25.6% preferred self-study. The other 2.4% preferred combinations of these three main modes of learning. The main reason for these results mainly included the fact that the synergistic learning environment, that classrooms provided, helped students understand their course work best. Another important reason is that several courses require physical involvement in their practical sessions. In this case, online learning would just play a supplementary role.

About students' satisfaction with the way their schools handled the closure, 29.1%, the majority, are indifferent. 28.6% are very unsatisfied and 17.9% are quite unsatisfied while only 13.4 % are very satisfied and 11% are just slightly satisfied. These results could be because many institutions were unprepared to handle the abrupt closure. Resilience to external shock is one of the several capacities that IHEs need to build. Below is the figure showing students' satisfaction, in it, the 'satisfied' categories are merged while the 'unsatisfied' categories are merged. It was done on a scale of 1-5, 1 being 'very dissatisfied' and 5 being 'very satisfied'. The average score is 2.6, which is- quite unsatisfied.

Figure 10: "What is your overall level of satisfaction with the way your school handled teaching after the school's shut-down?" (n=419)



Anticipated Impacts of Higher Education Disruptions on the Economy

Along with all the other sectors of the economy that have suffered a slowing down in activity and earnings as a result of the COVID-19 disruptions, the schools' shutdown has contributed to a few immediate effects:

The reduction in Ugandans' expected annual earnings through reduced tax remissions from IHEs to the Uganda Revenue Authority.

The Government of Uganda, as a result of the lockdown, has spent less on public IHEs. The public also has spent much less on the IHEs. This reduction in expenditure means IHEs have not expended the usual monies into the economy.

In addition to these, people's expenditures in the economy as a result of running the IHEs as staff, lecturers, or students have drastically dropped.

In the long run, the economy of Uganda will recover and even thrive from the systematic changes it is in the process of making.

UNESCO Responses and Recommendations to Education Disruption

UNESCO's data shows that over 1.186 billion students have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵ Uganda alone has over 10.6 million learners who have been disrupted, 165, 396 of whom are tertiary students.⁵

Half of the world's learners do not have access to a home computer which puts many of them at the inevitable risk of suffering learning losses.¹⁴ Although all the countries have been tasked to pursue distance learning with whatever means possible, many students live in conditions where this is not possible.¹¹

UNESCO recommends that the consideration of marginalized students should be at the forefront of designing the new learning approaches that schools must take.¹¹

These new strategies could be very instrumental in re-including previous school dropouts and children who hadn't been able to go to school for whatever reason.

Policy Responses and Recommendations

The way forward for IHE could make or break Uganda's future. Although this COVID pandemic has presented the world with several grave challenges, it also provides a great opportunity to make major changes that would change the trajectory of our country.



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Education, a tool that directly impacts the quality of life of a person, is at the heart of such opportunities. It can spur the growth and development of the country. Uganda's Human Capital Index is currently at 38%,¹² meaning a child born today is expected to achieve only 38% of their potential if they were to receive a good and full education and live in good health. This needs to change, and the new policies could promote this change.

None of these solutions, however, is without challenges. Therefore the challenges too must be mitigated to make these solutions effective.

Current Policy Responses Include:

These are policies in current existence. By these, IHEs and students are finding ways to continue learning during the schools' closure.

Promote remote learning. All schools have been tasked with continuing teaching through other means

like sending their students reading materials, etc. While this is a good response, it poses challenges for students who live in areas with no access to electricity or the necessary appliances to access the learning material.

Students are encouraged to study on their own, doing online reading, reading of their previous school work, and taking on any readings and exercises that their lecturers recommend.

Parents should be involved in supervising their children and providing them with academic guidance however they can. They should create supportive environments for learning, this may include cutting back on the household work children are expected to do at home. This will allow students to have sufficient headspace to tackle their academic workloads.

Policy Recommendations Going Forward

These are policies that will help IHE's and students to manage the continuation of education when schools re-open.

All IHEs should develop their healthy habit protocols that students should follow, in line with the standard operating procedures given by the MoES. These may include such practices as having fewer students per class, conducting classes in shifts, limiting gatherings, regular temperature checks, frequent hand sanitization, and wearing of masks.

Provide financial assistance to vulnerable students through scholarships or fee-forgiveness. This would reduce the school dropout rate. Priority should be given to female students who may have been married off or passed over as low priority by the families with meager resources.



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Introducing blended learning: setting up e-learning platforms, videos, and applications to educate the student body. Not all classes can be done online. Practice-based courses like medicine, carpentry, tailoring, those that require laboratory work, and all other hands-on courses are best done in person. However, many classes engaging in more theoretical learning can be done online. The two methods and even more can be blended for the highest efficiency. This is an approach that brings forth a great opportunity of being able to educate more people at an even lower cost. Uganda's adult literacy rate at 76.53% as of 2017.¹³ This can change drastically as even the adults can easily have access to adult education. Since Uganda's teaching method has mainly been that of face to face interaction with the teachers, going online will require significant effort from lecturers, but it still can be done.

Online platforms would require more affordable internet for students. The government and institutions could partner with internet providers to provide internet to all students at a low cost or no cost.

The blended learning must ensure that it is tailored to the needs of students with disabilities. This would greatly increase the inclusivity of the e-learning programs.

To achieve these milestones, **IHEs need to be granted even more autonomy** over their operations.

The MoES should guide IHEs with a general framework, but IHEs best understand their students and the possible resources they have to help educate their students in our current situation.

Students need to receive counseling and guidance on how to cope with the new normal. Their psychological wellbeing is very important. Social distancing and limited gatherings may lead to depressive tendencies. The counseling would be very useful to help students transition smoothly.

Diversifying the sources of income of universities and other IHEs. IHE's that have relied solely on tuition fees for their income are facing the hardest hits from the school closure. Diversifying into research and other investments would put all these institutions in crisis-proof places financially. Uganda's general investment in Research and Development is still very low, at 0.17% of GDP as of 2014.¹³ This is a sector that needs heavy boosting.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor of UCU, Rev Dr. John Kitayimbwa, informed APC that UCU is already working on growing its research base by expanding the research projects it is working on and potentially making research a significant source of income. This will result in great change for UCU as it will be less dependent on tuition fees and more shockproof towards other crises.

Diversification of their income portfolios is what IHEs could consider and emulate from Makerere University, which currently has a well-established research base, and UCU, which is just starting in this regard.

Overall, this pandemic has provided the necessary thrust and opportunity that Uganda needed to make changes that could have previously been deemed daunting. A new education system is already upon us. The pandemic that has brought down many is, in its way, changing our country.

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Notes

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