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Impact of the Pandemic on Higher Education in Emerging Economies: Emerging opportunities, challenges and research agenda

Emmanuel Mogaji*
University of Greenwich, UK
e.o.mogaji@greenwich.ac.uk
 0000-0003-0544-4842

Varsha Jain
MICA, India,
varsha.jain@micamail.in
 0000-0002-6740-4857

Abstract

The impact of COVID-19 on higher education cannot be overemphasised. With social distancing being in place and the increased use of technology, this paper presents opportunities for universities in emerging countries to meet the growing demand of prospective students who may not be able to travel abroad for their higher education, opportunities to improve the quality of education and build a partnership, albeit virtually with different Universities around the world. In addition, challenges that are specific to higher education in emerging countries which includes inadequate internet facilities and nonconductive home learning environment we also discussed. The paper finally recognises the need for more research to understand and provide theoretical and practical insight on how Universities in emerging economies can deal with the aftermath of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Higher Education, University, Research Agenda, Emerging Countries

Introduction

Higher Education has often been provided on a face to face arrangement; students and lecturers can engage in a stable learning space as they co-create knowledge. This teaching style also supports interpersonal networking and enhances the distribution of information (Cooper and Kurland, 2002), technology has also been embedded into teaching to complement the teaching arrangement, and social distancing was never an issue in a teaching environment, but things are about to change with the ongoing pandemic.

The COVID-19 is a pandemic (declared by the World Health Organization) that has affected almost every part of human activities. The outbreak has resulted in unprecedented measures taken by many countries, such as travel restrictions, restrictions on social gatherings (De Vos, 2020), working from home and social distancing. These measures were deemed essential to reduce and slow the spread of the virus (Musselwhite et al., 2020). Tourism, Transportation, Sports and Events has been affected significantly. Likewise, higher education institutions have had to close and result in online teaching.

According to the latest figures released by UNESCO, over a billion students worldwide are unable to go to school or university, due to measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2020). With 150 country-wide closures of educational institutions, there is a devastating impact on global education (McCarthy, 2020). A report from Moody's Investors Services also highlighted the financial implications of the pandemic on higher education institutions around the world as they may not be able to recruit prospective students (Moody's, 2020).

While Universities in the developed countries United States, United Kingdom, Canada or Australia may be deemed to be at a higher risk due to potential government funding cuts and lower investment income (Moody's, 2020), the pandemic is expected to have enormous impact on the higher education section in the developing and emerging

economies which has underlying economic challenges, poor infrastructural, government support (Olaleye et al., 2020) and low literacy rates. With all these issues, these countries still have to deal with COVID-19.

Though Universities in emerging countries are doing their best to remain relevant and meet the demands of their home students (Ndofirepi et al., 2020), they have their struggles which call for a different approach in dealing with the impact of the pandemic. While Internationalisation and marketisation of university are essential for the commercial viability of many Universities, emerging countries seldom attract international students, instead students from these countries are attracted to universities in the developed world. Universities in the developed world are more likely to open an international branch campus in the developing countries and not vice versa. Recognising these inherent challenges, this paper presents the opportunities that this pandemic brings and importantly, the call for research to understand and deal with these dimensions in the context of the emerging countries.

Opportunities for Higher Education in Emerging Countries

This pandemic brings some unexpected changes to higher education. Though the poor quality of education in the emerging countries has made Universities in the global north more attractive; this pandemic presents opportunities for higher education providers in emerging countries. A chance to be more aware of their situation and to take responsibility to make themselves better. The pandemic presents an awakening and a sense of responsibility

Before the pandemic, many students from emerging countries, including Africa, are opting to study abroad as they seek a better standard of education, with major destinations being France, Canada, the US and the UK (ICEF, 2018), but with the pandemic affecting face-to-face teaching, making Universities start considering online classes, Government ban on non-mandatory journeys and closed borders, there are indications that prospective students may not want to travel abroad to study and may

consider options in their home country. This inability to travel, at least for the foreseeable future, presents opportunities for university in these countries to develop their curriculum and teaching facilities to attract and offer quality education to prospective students who may have otherwise travelled abroad.

For those who may not be able to travel abroad, International branch campuses are being opened in many emerging countries. Webster University is an American university based in St. Louis, Missouri, with international campuses in Ghana (Webster, 2019). Middlesex University in the United Kingdom opened a second overseas campus in Mauritius, Toulouse Business School based in France has a campus in Casablanca, Morocco (TBS, 2019). Business School Netherlands has international branch campuses in Algeria, Ghana and Egypt (BSN, 2019). The prospects of these International Branch campuses remain questionable. There are possibilities that the home Universities may terminate these cross-border agreements as they try to balance their books amid this pandemic. The University of Reading's Malaysia campus, which opened in 2016, made a £27 million loss in 2017-18 while Aberystwyth University is planning to close its Mauritius campus (Bothwell, 2018). This challenging economic situation may present an opportunity for some of the Universities in the hosting country to meet the need of these students.

Also, Universities can engage and collaborate with many other researchers and Universities across the world. With growing interest in online classes, Academic staffs from the developed countries who may not have been able to travel to other countries may be invited to participate as guest lectures on online classes. Universities can use this relationship to attract prospective home students, highlighting the international collaboration and the fact that some of the best lecturers around the world will be teaching them online. This collaboration can also include research activities on a global level.

Universities in emerging countries including Africa are continually advancing towards providing a better quality education that is meant to address the ills of the continent

(Ndofirepi et al., 2020), this pandemic, therefore, presents a wakeup call for Universities to invest in their facilities and enhance student experiences. Here come the opportunities for the universities to reevaluate their teaching practises, their facilities and online teaching resources to make them ready for teaching and learning post-pandemic. This reevaluation should also include a redeveloped teachers' training curriculum further to integrate online teaching as a different teaching approach. Teachers and lecturers should be provided with the skills and knowledge to lead to online lectures. Besides, there are opportunities for innovations and developments, especially with regards to learning virtual environment and other educational technology for online teaching and student engagement and management.

Universities also have an opportunity for a differential advantage by offering specialised programs such as specialisation in tourism, travel, Technology, AI, ML and data analytics. Short term program, reverse innovation, focus on skill-based courses based on real problems, video first and print second for learning and localise the program and courses (Sheth, 2020). This drive for differential advantage also includes online transnational course development. For example, Students in the United States (US) may study African Languages, Culture and Art from an African University instead of learning about it in their home country.

Challenges for Higher Education in Emerging Countries

While there are opportunities for Universities in these emerging countries, there are challenges that need to be recognised. All Universities across the world are facing similar problems due to pandemic, but the universities from emerging countries have scarce resources to deal with this global issue. While Universities in the developed countries may be better prepared to adapt and transit to online challenges, there are inherent challenges for the Universities in the emerging countries.

There are challenges around the existing infrastructural developments of these Universities. For instance, they are underfunded by the government and have limited

teaching laboratories and library facilities, though the students' enrolment may increase due to the elevation in population. Admissions at public Universities have grown more quickly than the government's capacity to finance these institutions (Iruonagbe et al., 2015). The lack of funds has contributed to the inadequacy of infrastructural facilities in Nigeria Universities (Olaleye et al., 2020) as well as emerging countries from Asia. The universities operate in adverse conditions; overcrowding and deteriorating physical facilities such as laboratories, lecture theatres and student accommodation (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2008; Saint et al., 2003). While Private Universities in these countries may be equipped to provide online teaching, the underlying challenges within the countries cannot be ignored.

There are challenges with internet penetration and power supply. As many people may have to use the internet for online teaching and learning, poor internet connection poses a problem. The internet penetration in Nigeria stood at 42% in January 2020, and the average speed of mobile internet connections in Nigeria is 15.32 Mbps compared to the United Kingdom with 35.57 Mbps and Australia with 67.66 and with 96% of mobile connections in Nigeria being prepaid (DataReportal, 2020). Countries in emerging economies also have an average speed of 10 Mbps (Hannato, 2019). The financial implication of using the internet is also presented as many people may have to buy more data to engage with teaching and learning.

Also, the power supply in these countries possesses a challenge which may affect the teaching and delivery of the lecture. The World Energy Outlook special report recognises the persistent lack of access to electricity and the unreliability of electricity supply in emerging countries, including Africa. This lack of access is a factor inhibiting the progress and development of the continent as there are over 600 million people who do not have access to electricity in Africa (IEA, 2019) and 350 million people in developing Asia (Cozzi et al., 2018). While the continent has 20% of the world's population, it accounts for less than 4% of global electricity use (Economist, 2019). This lack of access to electricity also provides challenges for Universities, Staff and Students

who may want to adopt online teaching. This is a peculiar challenge for emerging countries which may not be applicable in more developed countries.

Urbanisation, growing population and the economic condition possess another challenge that is peculiar to emerging countries. Even in many developed countries, there are still disadvantaged students from various disadvantaged backgrounds including cultural minority groups, low income, migrant and Indigenous families have not benefitted from the use of the internet and new technologies (Ng & Graham, 2018). If some individuals are still disadvantaged in developed countries, there are many more disadvantaged students in emerging countries. As Ho & Lau (2018) recognises the impact of the home literacy environment on student engagement, the parental educational level, socio-cultural and economic conditions of these countries also poses an additional challenge. There are concerns around the parent's ability to support their children, the availability of conducive studying environment at home, especially when living in a high-density area. Importantly, in emerging countries, parents also have less literacy rate.

With these imposing challenges. A theoretical insight is needed to assist higher education managers, and other stakeholders are understanding the impact of the pandemic on higher education delivery and coping with the 'new normal' post-pandemic. Subsequent section highlights different strands for research that focuses on how the university, staff, students and parents

Research Agenda for Impact of the Pandemic on Higher Education

These are unprecedented time which Universities have experienced before, and this calls for an innovative solution to meet these challenges. As many Universities in the developed world may be better equipped to face this challenge, there are inherent challenges that universities in emerging countries will face, and that raises call for an agenda for research, practice and policy—theoretically exploring these issues in the context of the challenges of emerging countries and providing contributions relevant

for researchers, teachers and lecturers, university managers, policymakers, parents and other stakeholders.

Figure 1 below presents a conceptualised idea of the impact of the pandemic on higher education in emerging and emerging countries. While this is an inexhaustible area to explore, here are some research agenda worth exploring, providing insights and perspectives to improve higher education policy and practice in this time of the pandemic.

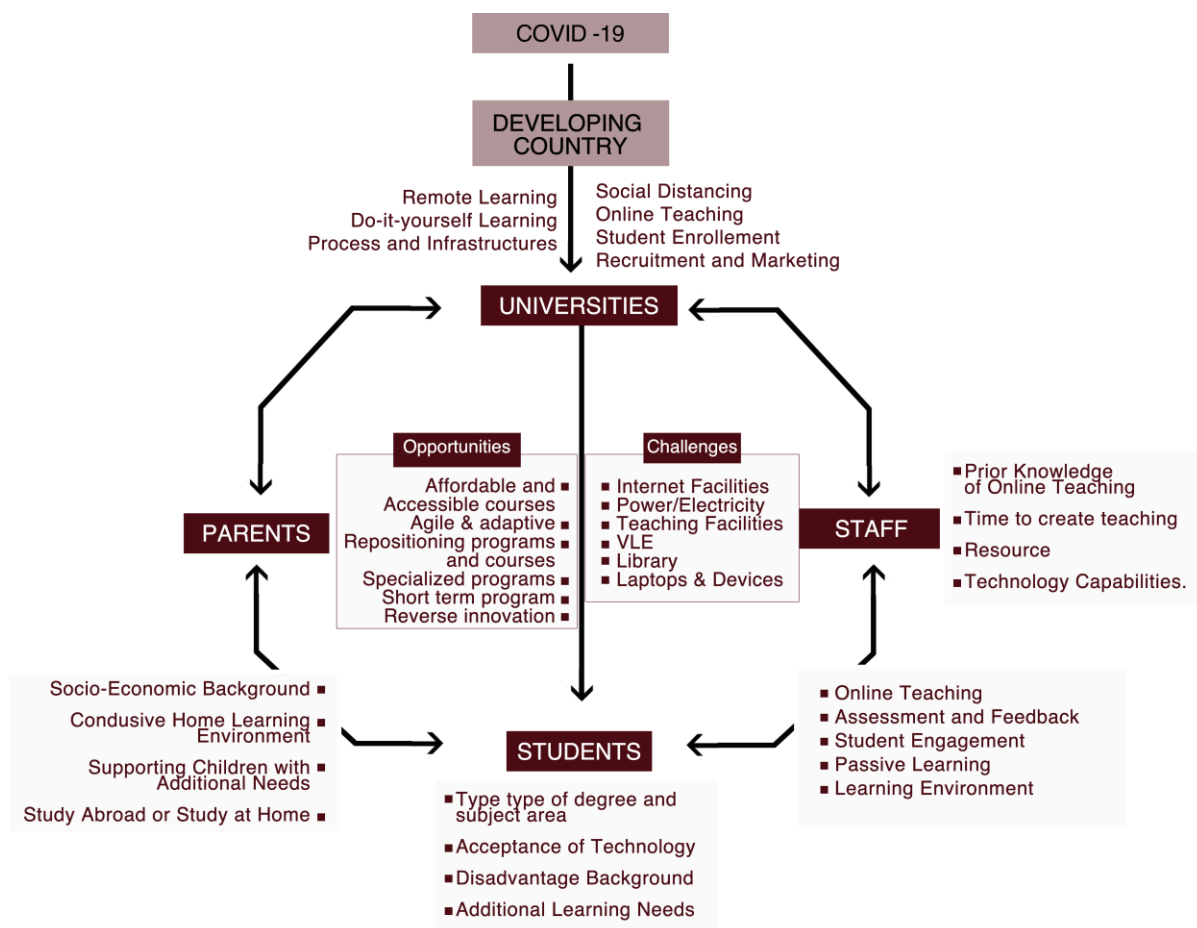


Figure 1: Conceptualising the Impact of the Pandemic on Higher Education in Emerging Countries

Universities

- The Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education in Emerging Countries
- Marketing of Higher Education in Pandemic
- The impact of COVID-19 on admissions and enrolment
- Facilities and Infrastructural development to cope with the challenges
- Educational Technology for online teaching and student engagement and management.
- Prospects of specialised and short-term programs.
- Non-rational competition during the Covid-19 such as MOCCs, Coursera, vocational courses

Staff

- Staff's perception, understanding and readiness for online lectures
- The staff's prior knowledge and resources to deliver online lecturers
- Measures for supporting disadvantaged students for inclusive teaching and learning

Students

- Willingness to acquire University degree or to defer to another academic year.
- Physical, Mental and Financial Wellbeing of Students
- Factors affecting student's engagement with online teaching
- Impact of the learning environment on Student Engagement
- Student Assessment and Engagement
- Students decision to study abroad
- Employability of Study and Readiness for Work

Parents

- The effect of socio-economic background on engagement
- Willingness to allow Children to study abroad.
- The impact of home literacy environment on Student Engagement

Conclusion

The impact of COVID-19 on higher education cannot be overemphasised. With social distancing being in place and the increased use of technology, there are opportunities for universities in emerging countries to meet the growing demand of prospective students who may not be able to travel abroad for their higher education. There are opportunities to improve the quality of education, opportunities to collaborate and build a partnership, albeit virtually with different Universities around the world. Institutions have to be agile and adaptive, innovative and should re-position their programs and courses which is more outside-in approach (not inside out).

This paper, however, argues that while all the countries are facing the same problem, emerging countries do not have the same resources to deal with the impact of this pandemic, unlike their developed countries counterpart. When discussing insights and perspectives to improve higher education policy and practice in this time of pandemic, it is essential to recognise the emerging challenges that are specific to higher education in emerging countries which includes inadequate internet facilities and nonconductive home learning environment.

This paper finally recognises the need for more research in this unprecedented time. This is not just having a global perspective about the impact but bringing insight from different emerging economies countries across the different continent, sharing theoretical and practical insight on dealing with the aftermath of the pandemic. This theoretical and managerial insights from the research strands will be relevant for practitioners and managers in emerging countries.

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