

# Challenges and Survival Strategies for Higher Learning Institutions Post Covid -19

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**Abstract:-** The higher education sector has experienced turbulence and crises over the years such as earthquakes, hurricanes and other catastrophes. Higher learning institutions have responded to these in diverse ways. The Covid-19 pandemic unlike other forms of crises which oftentimes were region specific in nature was a global crisis. The epidemic in addition to being a global phenomenon came so swiftly and was associated with protocols that instantly required abandonment of traditional modes of teaching and learning as it required social distancing measures to save lives for tertiary institution workers and students. Most educational institutions had to resort to remote or virtual learning modes of teaching and learning. As a result of urgency with which the pandemic came, there was little room to reflect on the response strategies or even budget for follow up interventions. The key impacts from the pandemic were that there was sudden shift to online modes of delivery across the globe. This brought about mental strain among learners and lecturers who had to shift to predominantly online modes of engagement with minimal or no prior training on use of online teaching and learning platforms.

Furthermore, higher learning institutions experienced reduced incomes especially for institutions that heavily depended on foreign students as enrolments shrank due to travel bans that were associated with the pandemic. The response mechanisms which succeeded were those closely tied to institutions that already had online engagement before the pandemic. Major challenges encountered by learning institutions had to do with online delivery support infrastructure, learning platforms, internet access, speed and cost. No universal survival strategies emerged except for smooth transiting from face to face interactions to virtual modes of delivery. Stakeholder engagement was identified as a critical factor by institutional leaders in coming up with survival strategies, for mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic.

**Keywords:-** Covid-19, Crises, Response, Strategies.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Covid- 19 pandemic has been witnessed in many spheres of life, including management of higher learning institutions (Bebington, 2021). The pandemic has brought about many challenges in many sectors of the economy across the globe (Tamrat, 2021). Following the disease management protocols which were put forward, some organisations closed down while others survived and had to find avenues for survival in an environment that had experienced stagnation and turbulence (Tamrat, 2021). It is against this background that this research has been commissioned.

## II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the study is to review scholarly literature on higher learning institution's survival strategies recommended by researchers in response to the pandemic. The study is intended to answer the following research questions:

- How did Covid- 19 affect tertiary learning institutions?
- What strategies have been used by higher learning institutions in the post Covid- 19 era to mitigate its adverse effects?

## III. METHODOLOGY

The study will take a cross sectional review of selected scholarly articles on the subject from materials on the subject from April 2020 to June 2022. For purposes of this review, the two research questions will be addressed by considering a number of studies that were undertaken from different parts of the globe. Some literature assumes a global perspective while others are region specific studies. The literature was drawn from Australia, Ethiopia, South Africa, USA and Romania to mention but a few. The researchers took such a perspective to have a broad understanding of impacts the pandemic had on higher learning institutions and follow up mitigation strategies to withstand the turbulence.

Insights from the literature would be used for drawing conclusions on effects of the pandemic and resultant mitigation strategies.

### A. Overview of the Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Higher Education Globally

Global higher education is no stranger to the upheaval caused by significant social, political, and economic change, but the magnitude and scope of COVID-19 are unprecedented in an era when it is both widely accessible and extremely internationalized. Leaders were forced by the COVID-19 epidemic to make crucial choices in the face of uncertainty, peril, volatility, and time constraints in order to discover ways to save their people and their businesses.

Turbulence is 'a period of inherently uncertain, shifting, incoherent, changeable, unexpected or unpredictable interactions between occurrences, expectations, and/or people, more often than not referred to as the "ground is in motion"' (Garretson, 2021). Due to the turbulence that results, the emergency occasion might already have passed or altered by the period implementable learning occurs. Turbulence, according to Ansell (2017, p. 78) is 'a condition where events, needs, and assistance interplay and fluctuate in extremely unstable, irregular, unanticipated, or unforeseen ways.' Due to their constant variability and lack of consistence, unsteady occurrences are also perceived as chaotic as they exhibit disarray and uncertainty (Lemoine, 2020). The three things which seem to cause turbulence most frequently are quickness, complication, and crisis escalation. A crisis is 'a major risk towards the complexes or rather the underlying traditions of a community, necessitating the taking of important choices within time pressures in extremely unknown conditions' (Garretson, 2021). Potential danger, speed, plus ambiguity constitute three crucial characteristics of a crisis, according to (Boin, 2010). When there is a need for an immediate reaction to events that is unknown and endangers core beliefs or life-supporting mechanisms, a crisis has occurred (Zhang, 2018). Turbulence can also result in unexpected events, instability, quickly changing operating plans, competing priorities, and unpredictability (Boin and Ansell, 2019).

Global marketization has engulfed tertiary education, and the business for universities around the world is growing quickly. The development, distribution, and use of learning is crucial for the world's colleges and universities. Because of the turbulence in this chaotic world, knowledge and information are held in higher regard and are therefore more globally connected than economic considerations, which leads to a state of dynamic instability. Nevertheless, the worldwide higher education industry is generally seen as a key driver of economic growth. Keeping a distinct identity and still being adaptable enough even to handle volatility, like the COVID-19 epidemic, is difficult for several businesses nowadays (Waller, 2020). Our world is becoming more unstable, and the challenges prevent their being available and waiting answers. The ability of leadership to make decisions amid times of peril, pressure, or ambiguity is demonstrated more by volatility throughout a disaster. Significant trade-offs are involved during epidemic regulatory changes, like reducing educational engagement that preserve life (Busby, 2020). Unfortunately, due to the unresolved research and inconsistent data regarding COVID-19, important choices were taken without authorities having a complete understanding on available

alternatives (Graham and Donaldson, 2020). As a result, politicians regularly turned to urgent pronouncements to reach snap judgments. There was no time for preparing during times of heightened pandemic or high disturbance as it was imperative to act quickly and carefully. Global spread as well as the interruption of indigenous procedures from an unforeseen danger were what made this outbreak what it was. Therefore, COVID-19 is better described as the dynamics of disaster whereby instability characterizes the environment. The COVID reaction began to be extensively known in lines of swift intervention to safeguard lives (Sharma, 2020). And so was the experience with COVID-19, disasters frequently force leadership to create snap judgments rather than lengthy preparations whenever companies need to switch between ordinary programming engagement to speedy reaction (Horton, 2020). Disruption encourages academic institutions to improve business activities, but it also frequently causes demand for quick, abrupt change that could show extreme volatility (Lemoine, 2020). International universities and colleges were under pressure to respond swiftly to these shifting circumstances in time to prevent incompatibilities within their surroundings.

For organizations, disruption frequently brings shocks, which makes planning challenging. A company's ability to predict things is a prerequisite for planning. While instability makes it challenging to make predictions, planning would frequently perform poorly within those circumstances. Disruption makes it difficult to make split second decisions, yet authorities for tertiary education around the world reacted in a nearly unprecedented show of solidarity by shutting institutions and switching to virtual learning to keep people safe (students, teachers, and employees) and their output (client knowledge) (Marshall J., 2020). To become more resilient, an institution must learn what to do to transition from its pre-crisis status to a given role that is superior (Izumi, 2020). It refers to navigating the problem with plenty dexterity to deal with difficulties and increase reactivity to different experiences. Being a worldwide issue, Covid-19 affects nearly majority of the planet (Carpenter, 2020).

### B. Covid - 19 Impact on Australian Public Universities.

Carnegie (2021) did a research based on Australian public universities on effects of covid-19 pandemic. This research likened to the impacts of Covid-19 to the 'black elephant in the room'. The basis of giving such an approach was that there was a problem in Australian public universities although no one was willing to publicly talk about the problem (Ibid). The purpose of the study was to explore the social and financial risks that were associated with the pandemic. The authors gathered data using media reports and annual reports from the thirty-seven public universities based in Australia.

The challenge to Covid-19 was termed as the black elephant in the room because according to legislation, public universities are not supposed to be profit making institutions but charitable institutions (Carnegie, 2021). Despite that, just like other universities elsewhere, Australian universities were expected to create and share knowledge for the benefit

of the masses. To support this ideal, Australian public universities used to get grants from the government. However, these grants were not adequate to support university operations. It was against such background that the authorities decided to liken the Australian situation as the elephant in the room as there was a problem which no one was willing to openly discuss. The grants were inadequate but universities were still expected to deliver satisfactorily (Andrew, 2020).

Due to inadequate public funding for universities, there has been commercialisation of public universities (Carnegie, 2021). This initiative embraced four dimensions of focusing on performance management, adoption of competitive quasi market methods for recruiting students, increasing dependence on international student fee income, and intensifying competition for research grant financing (Ibid).

Foreign student's income became a significant proportion for universities operating in Australia. In 2018 the number of foreign students that were studying in Australia where 200,000 representing about 38% of total income and by 2019 the number had grown to about 330,000 accounting for 44% of income and was expected to be growing going forward. The proportion of income accounted for by foreign students was 38% in 2018 and 44% in 2019 (Andrew, 2020). The global covid-19 pandemic came with travel restrictions which had the resultant effect of reduced incomes. As if this was not enough, there was a strong push to adopt other forms of learning other than face to face interactions.

The key outcomes from the research were revelations that institutions were exposed to financial and social risks following the pandemic. As a result of Covid-19, the number of fee-paying foreign students reduced substantially. The social changes manifested through job losses, mental strain and health issues, costs of adjustment for learners, staff and faculty as change to other modes of operation were inevitable following the pandemic. Though no specific strategies for survival were expressly recommended, there was a recommendation to strengthen the non-face to face modes of education management and commercialise education services. Education leaders were called to rethink the traditional ways of managing institutions to survive the impact of the pandemic.

#### C. Covid-19 and Emergent Remote Education in Britain

Oliveira (2021) did an exploratory study in Britain on the emergency of remote education experience for tertiary education learners and educators following the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim of the study was to understand the educational process, technological tools and personal adaptation for students and teachers. Countries have experienced disasters such as armed conflicts, hurricanes, earthquakes and others which affects infrastructure and therefore challenge the conventional forms of learning. Unlike the above, Covid-19 affected migration and not physical infrastructure. The pandemic came so abruptly and did not prepare institutions for online delivery. Online delivery though a good form of student engagement required

careful planning to maximise engagement and minimise student fraud in assessments (Lassoued, 2020). In responding to the epidemic, institutions had to make do with the available infrastructure.

Migration from face to face to Emergency Remote Education (ERE) came with challenges. These included four major dimensions. The first dimension was personal rejection and resistance to emergency remote education. The second aspect had to do with challenges closely related to administering examinations and tests online and being able to identify student strengths and weaknesses. The third challenge had to do with technical challenges. This had to do with weak internet speed, security and data confidentiality. The fourth obstacle had to do with financial difficulties. To deliver online, it was necessary to have capabilities and platforms to communicate remotely. Some students had challenges procuring computers for use for the exercise Oliveira (2021). Despite these obstacles, institutions had to migrate to remote education as a matter of emergency.

#### D. Education in Emergencies and Lessons from Covid-19 In South Africa

Landa (2021) undertook a study in South Africa detailing lessons which were learnt from Covid-19 as the education sector found itself in emergency. They undertook a qualitative study which considered strategies which were undertaken by two rural institutions of higher learning following the lockdown that was declared in South Africa in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The research was focused on two rural institutions in Eastern Cape Province. Prior to Covid-19, there were protests over accommodation dissatisfaction, institutional management and student registration exclusion arising from students' debt. Before the onset of Covid-19, there was already another disaster of student protests (Ibid, 2021).

The qualitative study of the two institutions in rural Eastern Cape aimed at documenting the strategies which were employed by the two institutions. Furthermore, there was need to establish challenges institutions encountered when delivering alternative forms of learning during the period of lockdown. Disasters of varying magnitude have been experienced in many parts of the world. Some of such disasters include: wars and natural disasters but the Covid-19 pandemic was unique and required different interventions to resolve the associated challenges brought by it (Landa, 2021).

The key findings from the study pointed to the fact that both universities that were used in the study already had online presence before the onset of Covid-19. The onset of Covid-19 made institutions to consolidate the remote online model of learning. However, this sole reliance on remote education had its own challenges to both learners and lecturers. One of the challenges was the battle of using technical IT terms and use of conventional technology devices for purposes of teaching without any prior learning about their usage in delivery of learning. The remote universities had challenges of internet connectivity and access. Furthermore, there were challenges of delivery

online as students and lectures were not very conversant with the usage of ICT in education. It also came out that rural institutions have much more prominent challenges of affording the cost of connectivity in as much as the internet connectivity itself is weak (Landa, 2021). The other challenges brought out by lectures was the difficulty of monitoring students as it was difficult to validate that students did the work on their own. Assessments were much more difficult to administer in terms of exams and tests and being sure that there were no malpractices in the process (Ibid).

#### *E. Enduring the Impacts of Covid-19 by Higher Education Institutions in Ethiopia*

The higher education sector has been noted as one of the sectors that have been adversely affected by the pandemic (Wondwosen, 2021). Mixed methods of data gathering were used whereby a diary documenting key events in Ethiopia was done. The other aspect was an online survey where questionnaires were sent out to all members of Ethiopian Private Technical and Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education (Ibid). Much of Ethiopian higher education is dominant by private owners or sole proprietors. As regards to education, the pandemic entailed banning of students and teachers meeting except by online means or other interventions which were not a variance with social distancing which were imposed following the outbreak of Covid-19. The impact of the pandemic was more serious on private higher education institutions since they did not get grants from government while the public sector institutions were cushioned by government grants.

In addition to financing and performance challenges, there was also another challenge of shifting to online mode of learning. The transition to virtual mode of delivery had its own challenges such as technical, social and structural. Virtual learning demanded students and lecturers being equipped with technical skills and the institutions needed to have infrastructure which often times was not adequate. Furthermore, acquiring infrastructure and getting good connectivity required huge budgets which many private learning institutions could not afford. Adjusting from face to face delivery was especially difficult where internet access, cost, availability of computers supporting technology coupled with lack of preparation for the pandemic were at play. Responding to the pandemic had its toll on expenses yet incomes were receding. Furthermore, institutions were expected to keep lecturers and incur other expenses. The pandemic had a net adverse effect on private sector higher learning institutions as the pandemic demanded higher expenses without a complimentary income increase (Wondwosen, 2021).

#### *F. Experiences and Perspectives from Covid-19 on Leadership for Higher Education Institutions In Romania*

Mutlu (2021) did a study on academic leadership in time of covid-19. The study used a case study on University of Romania to establish experiences for academic leaders in times of crisis. Covid-19 as a crisis necessitated immediate change and required innovative solutions. Among the outcomes of covid-19 were the associated stress and psychological pressure which came with the epidemic to students and other educational stakeholders. It was also characterized with ambiguity and lack of information which would make educational leaders adequately deal with it. Under the above conditions, there was need to create resilient organization. Necessity for fast learning and wise thinking cannot be overemphasized in times of crisis. It therefore calls for exceptional and competence to be able to make decisions in periods of turmoil as was the case of covid-19 (Mutlu, 2021).

In the case of academic leadership, there are many layers from the Vice Chancellor to operatives. All this need proper coordination. There are also various aspects of leadership embracing teaching leadership which is concerned with issues of pedagogy; research leadership focusing on production and sharing of knowledge and strategy embracing aspects of strategy and setting the vision of the institution (Mutlu, 2021). Multiple models were used in analysing attributes of effective leaders. According to the model by (Nathaniel P., 2020) effective leadership was viewed as having four attributes. The first element was associated with understanding the nature of crisis as the starting point in crisis management. The second aspect involved scanning through the options for mitigating the crisis and making viable recommendations from the options. The third aspect was concerned with gaining stakeholder buy in through effective communication. Finally, it was necessary that the recommended strategies were executed as mere designing of strategies would not yield any results (Mutlu, 2021).

The researchers referred to other models of academic leadership (Koehn, 2020) identified four components of effective leaders. These included availing clear roles, concentrating on learning experience, emotional ability and acknowledging fear. All the four components needed to be given attention to effectively manage in a crisis (Koehn, 2020). Citing Schwantes (2020), Mutlu (2021) mentioned four competences which were needed for leading in times of crisis. They included: flexibility, accounting for emotions, accommodating other opinions and gaining stakeholder engagement (Mutlu, 2021). Dimensions suggested by (Dirani, 2020) were that leadership should be the sense maker in a flux. After that, it was necessary that leaders play the role of technology enhancers. In crisis times, there are emotional issues which arise and therefore academic leadership should take centre stage in managing emotions. As all this is happening there is need for leadership to foster employee well-being and maintain innovative communication to ensure that there is collectivism in managing the crisis (Dirami, 2020; Mutlu, 2021).

In the case of Covid-19, the researchers concluded that shared leadership was more appropriate in managing the disruption that it brought. It was inevitable to disrupt conventional organizational norms and explore other innovative opportunities by substituting normal face to face interactions to build organizational resilience by being adaptive (Mutlu, 2021).

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

As much as disruptions have been experienced in higher education, Covid- 19 was much more of an emergency. It never gave leaders for educational institutions an opportunity to plan for response mechanisms. The literature has brought out mixed conclusions that tertiary learning institutions in remote areas had bigger challenges of adapting as online and remote learning which became the most prominent mode of education delivery was hampered by inadequate or even non-availability of platforms for delivering online learning. Poor ICT infrastructure, unreliable internet connectivity and cost of internet bundles to support connectivity also emerged as a challenge especially for students in remote areas where connectivity was low. This was particularly the case for students in Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

Revelations from literature further indicated that responding to the pandemic also brought in stress on students and lecturers who had to learn to interact purely online. Some of the education delivery platforms had technical terms and it was not automatic and easy for users to operate them. The pandemic left no room for people to learn about online delivery software as it came so abruptly and institutions were compelled to adhere to the disease prevention protocols which were imposed at global and national levels. The migration from face to face interactions in tertiary education institutions to virtual dimensions of engagement had possibilities for compromising integrity of assessments through academic fraud.

Literature has revealed that success for strategies for coping with the pandemic depended on availability of ICT infrastructure, good internet access and positive attitudes from educational leaders, students and faculty. It emerged that institutional leaders that were innovative and not traditional stood higher chances of survival during and after the pandemic. This was particularly so as pandemic translated in loss of clients and resulted in reduced incomes. Private higher learning institutions felt the bigger adverse effect from the pandemic than public institutions as they had no grants from their respective governments. There was need by educational institution leaders to take on board multiple stakeholder needs in bringing about successful adaptation in managing the after effects of the pandemic.

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