RUFORUM WEBINAR SERIES-2020

Students Connecting Globally to Visualise and Re-engineer Universities for a Better World post COVID-19

Webinar 12 Synthesis Report

Introduction:

With the advent of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the subsequent 'new normal', it is time to take advantage of the shrinking world due to globalisation and the new age of the 'Internet of Things' to connect students with each other across the world. Such connections would facilitate sharing, learning and collaboration for co-creation, innovation and solution development to address global, regional, national and local problems, such as the Pandemic. Students across the education value, especially those in institutions of higher education learning and universities, remain central to the research ecosystem for knowledge creation and innovation required to solve problems and support evidence-based policy making. In the current COVID-19 situation, young energies and minds across the world should continue being put to use to provide solutions to help reduce the spread of the virus, address the socio-economic impacts of the Pandemic, and recognise opportunities arising therefrom. In addition, the young energies and innovativeness are required to visualize and re-imagine the universities and higher education institutions, advocate for change, as well as support the building of resilient learning institutions. In this regard, the COVID-19 Pandemic is providing an opportunity for students to interrogate the system so as to stir into action a re-consideration of the purpose and process of higher education for better and more satisfying outcomes.

This report covers points of action and emerging issues from Webinar 12 organized by RUFORUM on *Students Connecting Globally to Visualise and Re-engineer Universities for a Better World post COVID-19* held on 30th September, 2020.

The Context:

While the current COVID-19 Pandemic has brought education activities across the world to a near-halt, it is offering new opportunities for joint learning, co-creation and co-innovation among students from across the world. Dialogue on the need to re-imagine higher education has been long happening, and should not solely be attributed to the shock that the COVID-19 Pandemic has brought on the functioning of higher education institutions, in general. Today, the voice of students across the world needs to be added to that dialogue. In addition, while the COVID-19 Pandemic might be having several negative impacts on the world today, preparing students to be change leaders for today and tomorrow, prepares the world to prevent and solve problems of the future.

Webinar Objectives:

The Webinar on *Students Connecting Globally to Visualise and Re-engineer Universities for a Better World post COVID-19* aimed at addressing:

1. The change in student education experiences across the world due to the COVID-19 Pandemic;
2. The response of universities to COVID-19, and student experience and thoughts on virtual learning and;
3. Student agreement on how to contribute to re-engineering universities and build a movement of student actors in this direction in various parts of world.

This Webinar was moderated by **Ms. Irene Akite, PhD Student, Gulu University, Gulu-Uganda**. A special guest message was given by **HE Professor Mrs Ameenah Gurib-Fakim** Former President, Government of Mauritius, Reduit-Mauritius. The presentations and discussions were given by:

1. *Mr Medard Kafoutchoni*, PhD student, University of Abomey Calavi, Benin;
2. *Mrs Chizoba Obianuju Oranu*, PhD student at Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Lilongwe-Malawi;
3. *Ms Sophie Galema*, PhD student, Wageningen University and Research (WUR), Netherlands;
4. *Ms Carmen Maria de Leone*, Fourth Year Student at EARTH University, Costa Rica;
5. *Ms. Nour Hammad*, PhD Student, American University of Beirut, Beirut-Lebanon;

Key Learning and Action Points:

The following are the experiences, action points and key messages of the different presenters with respect to '***visualising and re-engineering Universities for a better World post COVID-19'****:*

1. *HE Professor Mrs Ameenah Gurib-Fakim Former President, Government of Mauritius, Reduit-Mauritius*
   - The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the blue print for improving the human condition. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 Pandemic is reversing the gains so far in achieving the SDGs. These Goals need to be transformed into meaningful actions in order to serve even the poorest in our world. In promoting social justice and equity, the interrelatedness of economic development, education policy and engagement, must remain an important consideration;
   - Africa should take advantage of its youthfulness and the increasing population for the productive sectors to support socio-economic development and for responding to sub-Saharan Africa's challenges. This requires greater public investment coupled with critical thinking, sound policies, innovation and implementation. In order to harness the youth bulge, there is a need for basic and tertiary education, especially focusing on science education, technology, engineering and mathematics commonly referred to as STEM, vocational skills development, and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) revolution. Particular attention needs to be given to closing infrastructure gaps, taking advantage of local solutions by building high quality education systems, training of young people in STEM and related sciences, the key role of universities, agricultural productivity and productivity value chains, environmental sustainability, reversal of the proverbial

brain drain, harnessing new technologies, promoting research and development, translating academic research into entrepreneurship, securing intellectual property rights, collaboration and connections, and jobs. In the education value chain, there is need for a change in how people learn, what people learn, when people learn and why people learn, and re-thinking the students learning environment;

- The nexus between technology and economy must remain a key consideration; requiring strong links between industry and private sector;
- Africa's greatest resource is its people. In this regard, African governments need to develop policies that foster inclusivity and equity. Affirmative action is especially needed to increase the education for girls, participation of women in leadership and academia, and investment in women entrepreneurs.

2. *Mr Medard Kafoutchoni, PhD student, University of Abomey Calavi, Benin*
   - The COVID-19 Pandemic has had both negative and positive impacts on the conduct and progression of research and studies;
   - Negative impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic have included: lockdown restrictions which have hampered surveys, abandonment of field experiments, increase in the cost research requiring additional funding, challenges in meeting with the supervisors, and delayed completion of studies;
   - On the other hand, the COVID-19 Pandemic has provided some opportunities for some focused attention on data analysis, response to calls for proposals, and development and submission of manuscripts. Additionally, participation in online conferences and webinars at a reduced cost has resulted into improvement in science communication abilities, and exposure for career growth;
   - At the national level, the COVID-19 has created opportunities for the Governments, such as the one of Benin, to support universities transition to online learning through the establishment of an operational e-learning platform at the university.

3. *Mrs Chizoba Obianuju Oranu, PhD student at Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Lilongwe-Malawi*
   - The COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted several sectors of the economy with the education sector being one of the hardest hit. At LUANAR, the Pandemic has resulted into the disruption of teaching and learning activities, cancellation of exchange programmes and delays in the academic calendar, uncertainty for foreign students, increased budgets for internet services, and disruptions to students' internship programmes, research and field activities;
   - On a positive note, studying in the "new normal" has increased the speed in the use of online learning processes, allowing students to attend online classes at their convenience from any location. The increase in the number of free online conferences, workshops and seminars due to travel bans and meeting restrictions, has given increased opportunities to students who typically would require travel grants, to participate for free. The

increased participation of students in many online activities has also created further opportunities for expanding international networks;

- At the institutional level, LUANAR has responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic by introducing Zoom registration, organizing staff training in online teaching, enforcement of personal protective equipment, phased re-opening of the university and complete shift to online learning for all post-graduate programmes;

- In order to achieve a better learning environment post COVID-19, there is a need for strong institutional policy reforms, increased ICT support to staff and students, promotion of equal learning opportunities for all students, and more staff and student virtual exchange programmes.

4. *Ms Sophie Galema, PhD student, Wageningen University and Research (WUR), Netherlands;*

- As an example of measures undertaken by the Governments in Europe to curb the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Netherlands instituted measures such as working from home, providing students with logistical and subsistence support, and shifting to online learning until the end the academic year;

- Online learning in the context of WUR implies: no students on campus apart from for the purposes of laboratory and experimental work of some graduate courses; online examinations; cancellation of study abroad programmes; online student support including psycho-social support; and, a new course on 'Corona and my education' with tips on how to effectively work from home;

- Online learning has several challenges, which include: the lack of practical skills; heavy workload for teachers who have to juggle household chores and administering online modules; and, social isolation for students.

5. *Ms. Nour Hammad, PhD Student, American University of Beirut, Beirut-Lebanon;*

- In order to keep connected globally, students can join groups and platforms in their fields;

- Educational systems need to be more resilient for equitable and sustainable development and to be able to respond effectively changes such as those brought about by the COVID-19 Pandemic;

- Governments should exert their efforts in fostering equity and inclusion especially for marginalized youth so that they receive quality education;

- Strong leadership and coordination is needed to strengthen consultation and communication to allow for students to make positive contributions to their universities. In addition, a safe space for students from diverse backgrounds to bring their perspectives on the table where everybody can contribute, needs to be created. In this spirit, a follow-up is required on forming a student body with students that come from all the continents of the world to generate innovative ideas without any stereotypes and with the inclusion of marginalized countries. As a network, RUFORUM should assist in reaching out to its member universities to participate in this student movement.

6. *Ms Carmen Maria de Leone, Guatemala Fourth Year Student at EARTH University, Costa Rica*
   - In view of the marked cultural and technological differences between countries, even of the same region, such as between Guatemala and Costa Rica, educational issues should be context bound;
   - Planning for higher education needs to include the addressing of present challenges, in addition to focusing on the future. For many countries like Guatemala, there is a need for more schools and universities especially in rural areas; thus "bringing the universities to the people" so that everyone gets an opportunity to go to university. In this new normal, there is a need to transform learning spaces, to break generational gaps, and to prepare and train teachers to embrace online learning and applications. Additionally, the use of communication technologies needs to be well managed, strengthened and appropriate;
   - In order to foster information sharing globally among students, inter-institutional network platforms need to be created; information related to webinars, scholarships, job opportunities to mention a few, can be made available through such platforms;
   - At country and continental level, sound policies are required to enhance the wellbeing of people.

7. *Professor Teresa Akenga, Vice Chancellor, University of Eldoret, Eldoret-Kenya*
   - The COVID-19 Pandemic has affected a billion lives across the globe, with the possibility of pushing back many people into poverty;
   - The education sector has been one of the hardest hit sectors of the economy by the Pandemic and universities in general can re-engineer to respond to the "new normal" which has necessitated the transition into new modes of teaching and learning. With remote learning, students need to necessarily remain connected globally. In order to promote student connectivity in the "new normal", institutions must create infrastructure to support remote learning, set up independent online platforms, and forge partnerships with other institutions to tap into existing digital infrastructure;
   - On the other hand, the Pandemic has brought forth opportunities such as: (i) digital learning platforms that can virtualize internships; (ii) online research engagement and virtual professional development for students; (iii) online learning and creation of online learning platforms; (iv) virtual graduations ceremonies; (v) adoption of blended learning for courses that require practical and face-to-face engagement while adhering to social distancing and personal protection measures; (vi) institutional capacity building activities; (vii) digit-tech infrastructure; (viii) promotion of public-private partnerships (ix) exposure of students and staff to unlimited online opportunities; and, (x) strategic shift to the new paradigm and review of curricula;
   - As part of the way forward, RUFORUM needs to operationalize the AfriDAP initiative in order to escalate a shift to online learning in the African continent.

RUFORUM Secretariat, 30 September 2020