

Achieving equitable access to higher education post COVID-19 pandemic

Krish Chetty

Webinar Series for PASGR-PLUS

24 November 2022



Why does “equitable access to quality Higher Education (HE)” matter in Africa?

- Understanding what equitable access is more important now, more than ever, given the role the pandemic has had in reshaping, possibly reimagining how higher education is delivered.
- Simply, your **access to education is now greatly influenced by the digital resources you have access to, whether you can afford to use these resources**, to what extent you can engage with these resources in your community, your understanding of how to use these tools, how institutions ability to deliver a quality online learning experience, and then trying to work out what that means in our unique contexts across the continent.
- Once the basics are in place, you can then start to think about questions about how to best deliver lessons with limited staff to student engagement. How to grapple with issues of pedagogical quality?
- Should I just be reading out my slides in a recording or is there a better way to convey the lesson?

Why does “equitable access to quality Higher Education (HE)” matter in Africa?
Why does it differ in other geographical regions?

- Firstly, more developed countries like China and Russia don't really have to contend with the access challenge. The mobile coverage is there. Usage of digital tools is more normalised, as your students have grown up using them, and they can apply the tools in learning. They have the opportunity to grapple with issues of quality.
- In developing countries, using technology is more of a **novelty**. We haven't figured out what's the optimal way to convey the content online. What we've been delivering is **Emergency Remote Teaching, not necessarily inclusive online learning**. We still need to resolve the access challenges, and then also deal with skills shortages among staff and students.
- And our African institutions need to address these issues, while dealing with shrinking income given that allocations from government had to shrink in the face of economic challenges and with a loss in accommodation fees from students forced to stay home.
- Once we're able to deal with these issues, we can start to deal with issues of quality

Online Learning Experiences in Kenya – Prof Odeboro

- It is pleasing to see a detailed quantitative and qualitative study describing the experiences in Kenya. Most papers are based on small samples and not informed by strong academic rigour, so this is a very important achievement.
- I'm hoping this work can influence Kenyan policy and help us deal the advances of digitalisation. Even though, we're heading back to campus now, perhaps we can see the pandemic as the catalyst that helps **prepare our young people for the advances of the 4th industrial revolution**. If nothing else, this study can be a wake up call, and it tells us how under prepared we are to engage with technology.
- Previously **accessing the university campus was the great equaliser**. Everyone had access to the tools they needed from accommodation to computers, printers and wifi. Our lockdowns stripped that away from us, and highlighted the great disparities in homes.
- That statistic of 30% laptop ownership has stuck with me. I cant imagine how one goes through university using just a phone. How do you write assignment on your phone?
- What it also shows is that our universities in Africa have much to do to first get the basics ready to support online education. Internet access and suitable devices are only the first level. Then you must address affordability issues. Then you address skilling issues. Only after that can you start the conversation on pedagogical quality and finding the right model for learning so that you can promote engagement and grapple with what is needed for learning to happen effectively.
- Face to face is also only 50% effective according to the study, so its not working well either, and we need a new model that merges the best of all worlds

Challenges to online learning in BRICS and Africa

- From my perspective, the pandemic has really exposed inequalities in our households. While, **some bursaries and scholarships extracted the student out of their home environments** and brought them into an environment with access to necessary facilities, the pandemic pushed you back to your homes, with limited internet access, broken computers, intermittent electricity. So now your education was dependent on your **routines in your village**, did you finish your **chores** before you switch on the computer. It also depended on how fluent you and your lecturer were at using the new platform and easily one can communicate.
- From a BRICS perspective, these challenges have been common in Brazil, India and South Africa. India has a massive network of universities but they also contend with rampant inequality. In 2020, **none of their top 100 universities were able to maintain a consistent online** programme, and most had given up entirely by August. In Brazil, the universities were dealing the madness of President Bolsonaro who decided to cut education budgets in the midst of the pandemic. There are stories of universities approaching police stations to get access to phones and laptops that were seized during criminal investigations, such was their desperation.
- But in **Russia and China, you heard more about the success stories**. In Russia they focused on dealing with the issues about staff to student engagement, and what they introduced were an **army of teaching assistants**. They broke classes up into smaller sizes and asked teaching assistants to assist with the basic questions. More complex questions were then posed to the lead Professor of the class.

How Online Learning has affected **disadvantaged/vulnerable/marginalised groups**

- The challenge affecting females, particularly in rural areas, has been access to the internet and computers
- Sometimes females using the internet is seen as a taboo. In India for example, it becomes a big problem if a young girl visits an internet café alone. She is obviously looking for a husband? – or that's the view in the community?
- Why do you need a phone? You want to go on Facebook - that's a route to find boys – that's no good.
- You need the phone for studying, wait till I'm done with it for work – before you get to 'play' on the phone.
- So these are some of the cultural taboos which are very restrictive. The question is how do you design a programme around this. In India, they have set up some information resource centres which are managed by women. This helps break some of those sentiments. You also run programmes at times that are conducive for people to access the programme, recognising their time poverty and difficulties in the household.
- We will need to design our teaching programme around these realities if we want equitable participation in the learning process.

The role of the public sector

- Let me give you an example from China. In China, you had the benefits of Central Rule.
- The Central Govt decided to introduce a mass training programme in Feb 2020 and ensure that every teacher and lecturer was enrolled in a crash course in the relevant tools. China also mandated their EdTech sector to introduce new tools that could be adopted by schools and universities. And this all happened very quickly. They also mandated every business in rural areas to open their doors and their wifi to students and learners, so they could study from these facilities. Through this measure they made efforts for the country to work together to solve the access problem.
- On the continent, online learning became a big political issue. Some governments quickly shut down online learning, weeks after programmes were started. In Uganda for instance, Makerere shut down their programme in July after realising the impossibility with inadequate electricity or difficulties in negotiating Zero-Rated educational content with their mobile network Providers. If universities wanted to restart an online learning, they had to make a submission to the government to prove how they would deal with issues of inequality.

How institutional, national, regional and global policies support or hinder equitable access to learning during the pandemic?

- In my review of the BRICS and the Association of African Universities, before the pandemic there were no plans or policies to promote online learning.
- So the shift to go online was a complete shock to the system. Their pronouncements in support of online learning really had no bearing on the national situation.
- In South Africa, for example, I would really have liked the national government to take the lead in negotiating with our mobile network providers, to ensure that students get supported through a blanket agreement to zero-rate content. Here, every university had to individually negotiate data deals and zero-rating their content. This should have been centralised as you had in China.
- We also need our policymakers to think creatively in how to address to access problem, as that is the critical roadblock preventing us from grappling with online learning and what it means in our contexts.

Trends, practical lessons, innovations and/or opportunities do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has provided to catalyse positive change/ improvements in access to quality higher education in Africa and elsewhere?

- In **Egypt**, the national government also introduced a shared online learning platform that all public educational institutions could share. The platform was set up by Microsoft and provided the generic services that a university or college needed. This was a great initiative, because while we focus on the universities, we also need to remember that the TVET colleges suffered greatly in this period and didn't have the ability to negotiate deals with mobile network providers in the same way our big universities have.
- I also like the example from **Russia** with the teaching assistants. Once you've solved the access problem, you need to address the engagement problem and the Russian model creates employment opportunities, potentially allows you reduce building expenses and provides a method to boost engagement with someone knowledgeable on the subject. Crucially, here you need to train these assistants so they can perform at a suitable level to ensure a quality product is offered.

9. What *institutional, national, regional, or global policies* do you think *are now available* (because of the COVID-19 pandemic), *or need to be put in place, to protect higher education institutions* within and outside Africa against future pandemics and wide scale disruptions?

Each panellist will be invited to respond, given their different subject and geographic areas.

- We need to view what happened as an opportunity. **It showcased our weaknesses** and let us know how far behind our higher education institutions fare in comparison to the developed world. And then by extension, we **realise how underprepared our young people are to compete in a globalised digital economy.**
- For me the big take away is **how do we centralise digital inclusion policies.** Could the education sector be agent of change in ensuring that our young people get capacitated with the resources and skills to engage.
- We also need the state **to take the lead in negotiating the deals** that matter that promote equal access. This can counter creating new forms of inequality where one student has better opportunities because of the institution they're enrolled in.

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Achieving Equitable Access to Higher Education Post COVID-19 Pandemic
24th November 2022 | 12PM GMT/3PM EAT

PANELISTS

PROF STEPHEN ODEBERO
Professor of Educational Planning
Masinde Muliro University of
Science and Technology
Speaker

DR CLARA ARABA MILLS
Lecturer
Institute for Educational
Planning and Administration
University of Cape Coast

MR KRISH CHETTY
Research Manager of Inclusive
Economic Development Division
Human Science Research Council

PROF TRISTAN MCCOWAN
Professor of International Education of the
Institute of Education
University College London

Participants (53)

Panelists (14) Attendees (39)

Find a participant

- Mr. Krish Chetty (Me)
- JM Jane Muchiri (Host)
- KC Krista Cecille Samson
- DP Dr. Pauline Essah (Co-host)
- DP Dr. Pauline Ngim... (Co-host)
- IK Izel Kipruto (Co-host)
- RM Rachael Matayen (Co-host)
- S Sam (Co-host)

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Abdoulaye SALL to Everyone

AS Thank you

Yaw Oheneba-Sakyi to Everyone

YO I think much depends on developing a 'Digital Mindset' which would move us from the heavily dependent the face-to-face model of teaching and learning.

Who can see your messages? Recording On

To: Hosts and panelists

Type message here...

Dr. Pauline Essah

Mr. Krish Chetty

Tristan McCowan

Dr. Clara Mills

Krista Cecille Sa...

Krista Cecille Samson

Professor Stephen O...

Professor Stephen Odebero

Dr. Pauline Ngim...

Dr. Pauline Ngimwa

Rachael Matayen

Rachael Matayen

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Panelists (13) Attendees (30)

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- AM Alphonse Muzira
- AV Arianna Valentini
- AO Arthur Odima
- CC CPA Charles Ringera
- DB DR. BENARD ODOYO OKAL
- ET Ekow Tachie-Mensah
- EA Eugene Atinda
- EN Eugene Nweke

Webinar Chat

Dr... to Arthur Odima, Hosts and panelists

DP Thank you Arthur for your participation. Pleased to see one of our PhD students.

Might Abreh to Everyone

MA Thank you for a productive session. Prof Odebero and the rest of the panelists have been an excellent time connecting with all of you today!

Who can see your messages? Recording On

To: Hosts and panelists

Type message here...

Dr. Lucy Heady

Dr. Lucy Heady

Dr. Pauline Ngim...

Dr. Pauline Ngimwa

Rachael Matayen

Rachael Matayen

Sam

Sam

Joy Karwitha

Joy Karwitha

Izel Kipruto

Izel Kipruto

Jane Muchiri

Jane Muchiri

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