Implications of the Rapid Switch to Online Learning due to COVID-19 in the Context of South African Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

- Online learning has been a focus for many institutions around the world in recent years, but the push for it has exploded since the spread of COVID-19.  
- Universities have had to rapidly switch to distanced learning to keep their students on track. Some nations have found this an easy transition due to existing infrastructure, but many developing countries, such as South Africa (SA), have struggled with this transition.
- Higher education (HE) systems are faced with this new challenge of providing a new learning platform for their students when they might not have the means to do so.

Relevant Literature

- SA has many infrastructural challenges, they cannot afford the cost of data, and there is a lack of broadband.  
- Many educational websites, such as Blackboard, are not hosted in the country.  
-Universities have had to adjust their budgets to produce the financial means to negotiate with cellular networks to provide data to their students.  
- Many groups of students and faculty live in remote areas that do not have access to electricity and network coverage is poor.

Background

- Even though each nation does not follow the same HE development path, it is helpful to look at other institutional models to better understand the variety of ways programs can be run, especially in the case of how COVID-19 has influenced HE in developing countries.
- Every institution is influenced by several different factors, such as stakeholders, infrastructure, societal traditions, politics, and economic developments, but the entire world has been affected by this virus.

- 50% of student enrolments in post-school education and training institutions in SA are at HE institutions.
- SA institutions are varied in their access to e-learning resources.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

- E-learning has the potential to hinder the genuine interactivity that occurs in the classroom.
- There needs to be a development of software that promotes the collaboration and communication between students and faculty.

- Every student learns material in a unique way, and not every student will be able to easily adjust to an online environment.
- Instructors should use multiple different software programs to adapt to student needs.

- This switch might also widen the knowledge silos between those who have access to the internet and those that do not.
- Governments need to invest more in their HE institutions, when possible, to provide equitable access to disadvantaged students.

Conclusion

- Understanding how institutions within SA have made changes in the COVID-19 reality would provide guidance to other developing countries and institutions on how they might be able to execute this change in a way that best helps their faculty, staff, and students.
- There is a clear digital divide between institutions with the means for online learning and those who do not – this rapid switch widens the gap of higher education accessibility and success.
- Working together to provide the best solutions for institutions around the globe will address the question, “how do we allow everyone to be part of learning and able to access the social justice of education?”

References

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