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**Theme:** Innovations for Educational Resilience  
**Sub-Theme:** Building Resilience  
**Topic:** Tertiary Education Disruptions and Readjustments amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic in Botswana

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**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a global nightmare that continues to pose a multi-faceted threat to human existence. For many institutions, the pandemic outbreak has actually forced them to take an Online and Distance Learning pedagogical approach by adopting the use of various educational technologies to facilitate online teaching and learning as the main form of instruction in higher education globally. This paper seeks to discuss the impact of COVID-19 and highlight the initiatives conceived and implemented by some Universities across Botswana in response to the disruptions caused. The paper focuses on the interventions in leadership, curriculum delivery, assessment, research and student support.

Desk research shows that responses to the pandemic varied across institutions as shown by the identified three Botswana Public universities: University of Botswana (UB), Botswana International University of Science and Technology (BIUST), Botswana Accountancy College (BAC) and Botswana Open University (BOU). Common across these universities is that they all took a decision to find ways of ensuring continuity of teaching and learning activities through adoption of educational technologies. Going forward, it is important that institutions should undergo a serious paradigm shift towards embracing the use of educational technologies in learning and teaching.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Educational Technologies, ODL, Pandemic, Paradigm Shift

**1. Introduction**

1.1. Preface

Mankind is faced with the COVID-19 existential threat that is running to two years since its advent and continues to disrupt global Public health and economies. Around 5% of the global population is recorded as confirmed cases, with over 6 million deaths. The disruptions have particularly hit the education sector, where tuition and other educational processes have been hampered severely. In fact, this has led to the disruption of the normal curriculum delivery that heavily relied on face-to-face interactions between staff and learners in order to facilitate teaching for most Universities. Therefore, institutions like colleges and universities have been forced to either shut down (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Yap, 2020) or reinvent themselves and remain relevant. Such reinvention for resilience has called for various readjustments to be made as the pandemic roars on.

Jena (2020) cites a UNESCO report that points out that COVID-19 has affected nearly 70% of total world's student population as per the data collected during the 1<sup>st</sup> week of June 2020. However, the proportion of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) at which teaching has been suspended or cancelled is very low in all regions of the globe, except in Africa, where it is currently reported to be at around 24% (Jena, 2020). Actually, only 29% of African HEIs were able to quickly move teaching and learning truly online, compared to 85% of HEIs in Europe. Two-thirds of African HEIs were taken aback by the pandemic and were not prepared to move teaching online, leading to them closing their campuses and suspending teaching. This would have meant the end of business for these institutions and, for them to be able to continue with teaching and learning, they had to reinvent themselves and make salient process readjustments.

To remain relevant during the pandemic, the majority of the institutions are working on developing solutions to continue teaching and learning, through the digital or self-study approach. However, there is still one quarter of African HEIs for which teaching is completely cancelled and, if this situation will persist, it will have a major negative impact on the learning opportunities for students. The Open and Distance Learning (ODL) shift has been very urgent and has grown into a crucial and important global strategy in resolving problems of access to education (UNESCO, 2004). Nonetheless, ODL programmes have their own unique problems that are symptoms of underlying challenges facing ODL students. Such problems can be situational, attitudinal, psychological and pedagogical (Berge et al., 2002).

## 1.2 Bumpy Road to Renewed Relevance Through Readjustments

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Universities, in particular, were forced to come up with varied interventions in many spheres including governance, leadership, curriculum delivery and student support. According to Mok et al. (2021), this ‘rush-to’ transfer has brought the new phenomenon called “emergency online learning”, which has brought confusion to instructors, students and higher education administrators, among others. The urgent readjustment or re-engineering of the educational landscape has been a mammoth challenge, especially with the Universities and other tertiary levels, to enable tuition and other educational processes to continue unabated as the pandemic takes hold (Gyimah, 2020). As the European University Association (EUA, 2020) puts it, the coronavirus crisis has challenged higher education institutions in many new and unexpected ways, as universities have had to take radical measures and make major efforts to slow the contagion and to better understand the virus, thereby forging new paths in crisis management. This effectively forced Universities to come up with varied non-contact technology mediated interventions to facilitate continued learning. However, this brings both challenges and opportunities, particularly in relation to digitalisation and digitally enhanced teaching and learning, with the active use of technology.

## 2. Major Academic Disruptions From the Pandemic in Botswana

No country in the world has been spared from the effects of the pandemic on the tertiary education system. Botswana, a country in Southern Africa, is no exception. In response to the impacts of the pandemic, it put in place various measures, notably the lockdowns, where citizens and residents were confined to their homes for defined periods, with only strictly controlled and essential movements allowed. All schools were closed from 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020, with teaching resuming on 2<sup>nd</sup> June. On 31<sup>st</sup> March, His Excellency the president of Botswana, Dr Mokgweetsi Eric Keabetswe Masisi declared a State of Public Emergency for the purpose of taking appropriate and stringent measures to address the risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. He advanced that a 28-day State of Public Emergency within his powers would not be sufficient to employ the necessary measures to fight the pandemic. The State of Public Emergency would have spanned from Thursday, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2020 until Thursday, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2020 but, days later, the president wanted this to be for six months up to 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2020. The National Assembly was called in order to vote on the six-month extension and on Thursday, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020 the National assembly voted in favour by acclamation.

The above measures, though favourable in controlling the pandemic, affected the education landscape in the country negatively. There was limited contact and thus conventional teaching with students in a classroom or other confined space was brought to a halt, forcing universities to look for other avenues for business continuity. So, when Botswana Tertiary institutions re-opened following national lockdowns, they were compelled to re-consider their long-standing pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. For most Universities, academic activities mostly affected by the pandemic have been:

- 2.1 Curriculum Delivery – Face to face Teaching and Learning ceased to take place as a result of the lockdowns in Botswana and globally, in compliance with Public Health and Social Measures (PHSM) or protocols.
- 2.2 Assessment Activities were negatively affected as students could not physically present themselves to sit for their examinations in the normal examination venues. Therefore many universities either adopted to abandon formal examinations and relied on Continuous Assessment marks to determine final performance, while some decided to undertake online assessment in its various forms instead. Such moves also clearly affected quality negatively, as they were forced and unprecedented. To try to maintain quality in operations, quick fine adjustments had to be made by the institutions.
- 2.3 Graduation ceremonies were also affected as it was no longer possible to organize such congregations due to the associated health risks. This forced many Universities to adopt the use of technology to arrange Virtual graduations. The reason being that failure to graduate students would have had a negative impact on their employment opportunities as they would not be in possession of their qualifications. To say the least, this was also a challenging feat, both to the institutions and the students.
- 2.4 Student enrolment and registrations were negatively impacted for many Universities. This created an opportunity for institutions to adopt the use of technology to facilitate online enrolment of students. However, getting technology-oriented to do business calls for various precipitated adjustments, especially financial, where required platforms and gadgetry need to be put in place.
- 2.5 COVID-19 has both negative and positive impacts on research. The negative side of the pandemic is that it has made it impossible for researchers to travel and work together with others nationally and internationally, thereby killing some aspects of effective partnerships. <sup>[1]</sup>The positive side is that Academics got acquainted with technological tools and methods to improve their desk and other

research skills. Webinars and e-conferences became normal methods for sharing knowledge and expertise among students and academics around the globe.

### **3. Social Cohesion Disruption**

Distance education, as has been forced by the COVID-19 pandemic, comes with other inherent drawbacks, due to the disruption of social cohesion found in conventional universities. The global coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly changed the education landscape worldwide (Mok, Xiong and Rahman, 2021). In addition, the pandemic has not only interfered with student mobility, but it has also hindered student development and learning experience because of the sudden transfer of conventional face-to-face classes to online learning regardless of instructors and students' readiness (Marginson, 2020; Mok, 2020). Students who are enrolled with online and distance learning (ODL) universities have expressed concerns over problems that can negatively influence their progression and success with their various programmes. Challenges like isolation, drop-out, late completion of programmes (Musingafil et al., 2015), together with depression and the use of poor-quality study materials might drive negative outcomes that should not find place in a high-quality system. What therefore comes to mind is whether learner support has an acceptable standard in the institutions during these COVID times, having had to rush into the online mode.

To alleviate some of the challenges inherent with such mode of tuition, there should be adequate student support services put in place (Tladi and Nleya, 2021). For example, learner materials used for conventional education of face-to-face tuition cannot be adequate for the online mode. This thus requires that those who are experts in developing interactive learner materials, to make the materials to be by themselves the instructors, have to be brought on board. Another intervention should be the provision of adequate remote counselling, but this brings another problem around issues of trust, confidentiality and data mining. Near-human counselling systems need to be developed.

### **4. Institutional Readjustments**

It emerged during the pandemic that institutions were not ready for the sudden change they were forced to adopt in response to the pandemic. The issue of know-how also comes into play as ICT skills are necessary for proper implementation of technology in teaching and learning. To this end it is necessary that institutions should invest in rigorous training of students and staff to facilitate acquisition of the necessary skills for eLearning implementation at tertiary level. Responses or readjustments to the pandemic in Botswana, though similar in their philosophies, have been varies across institutions. These are addressed with respect to some tertiary institutions in the country

#### **4.1 University of Botswana**

The University of Botswana (UB) took major steps and adjusted the Academic Calendar as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The main points addressed are outlined below.

- There were no formal examinations and assessment of students was done through continuous assessment, said Acting Deputy Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs on July 6, 2020.
- For the 2020/2021 first semester, there was no midweek break
- The 2019/2020 graduation was scheduled for October 29 to 30, 2020.
- The university closed on December 23, 2020. Reopened when?

UB also adopted the Blended Teaching & Learning approach to Mitigate COVID-19 Impact. The University of Botswana spent P7.8 million to provide students with free charged sim-cards through a Memorandum of Understanding with Botswana Telecommunications Corporation. The sim-cards were to be loaded with Internet data for students to download learning material. The University adopted the approach that blended teaching and learning would become the "new normal" to ensure safety and compliance with COVID-19 health protocols on campus. The University further emphasized that it would do everything possible to make sure that teaching and learning was "as effective as if there was no pandemic". In implementing this new approach, the University committed to ensuring that this new thrust should therefore be matched by a quality preparedness and delivery, that must be done in a snappy manner, as the pandemic set in quite abruptly.

#### **4.2 Botswana International University of Science and Technology**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Botswana International University of Science and Technology (BIUST) adopted new methods of teaching combining a blend of traditional face-to-face and online teaching in large classes. Classes with large enrolment were split into smaller sections to comply with Covid-19 protocols. The spill-over sections in any given class were taught simultaneously using the blackboard linked collaborate online system. In the long term, the University intends to move to full on-line on campus teaching, gradually starting with academic year 2020/21.

Additionally, BIUST joined hands with partners locally and regionally in mitigating the spread of the virus. The University developed a number of products aimed at assisting the Government of Botswana in combating the COVID-19 Pandemic, as a means of expressing its commitment to local stakeholders, wider society and the environment. A few are mentioned below:

1. Production of sanitizers: produced according to World Health Organisation (WHO) standards and Botswana Bureau of Standards specifications on hand sanitizers.
2. Production of Soap: BIUST partnered with the Local Enterprise Authority (LEA) for production of bathing soap and Liquid soap. The bar soap was tested by Botswana Medical Regulatory Authority and it was proved to be safe for general bathing purpose.
3. Drone Project: The aim of the project was to disinfect the air of open public spaces in the time of COVID-19 pandemic. The air disinfection was intended to work in collaboration with manual disinfection by humans that target ground surfaces.
4. Development of Dashboard: Through collaboration with iThemba LABS and Wits University, a dashboard for visualizing COVID-19 pandemic in Botswana was developed. It gives a detailed analysis of corona virus using maps, diagrams, graphs and pie charts.

### **4.3 Botswana Accountancy College**

Botswana Accountancy College responded by adopting the following interventions as a way of mitigating Covid-19 impact as per its notice of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020:

1. Allowing employees to work from home
2. Online submission of Applications
3. Putting in place a strategy to provide data sim-cards to students to enable them to have access to internet
4. Encouraged students to do independent learning
5. Adopted online learning approach
6. Partnered with other institutions such as BOU to provide students with access to resources
7. Embraced online Assessment

### **4.4 Botswana Open University**

Since its creation in 2017, Botswana Open University's (BOU) operates mainly through remote means using technology and digitalization. Such an approach makes it the only online and distance learning (ODL) institution in Botswana, and one of the few in Africa (Aiyuk, Tladi & Kaniwa, 2021). However, despite its seemingly advantage, BOU was not spared by COVID-19, bringing process disruptions that had to be fought against. Given the ravaging nature of the pandemic, the Executive Management of the University established a Task Team to advise on the management of the response to the pandemic. Therefore to continue with meaningful education during this time of the pandemic, BOU has had to make salient adjustments in an effort to ramp up its technology initiatives so as to reposition itself in order to remain relevant. A summary of the gamut of digital responses from the University includes the following:

- Adoption of Strategy for Technology Enhanced Teaching, Learning Assessment and Student Support (STELTASS) in November 2019 – To guide implementation of ODL Technology within the BOU
- Working from home policy introduced in March 2020
- E-Tutor Model
- e-Technology mediated programmes and LMS
- Online submission of assignments
- Online assessment /Examinations – Challenge here is Proctoring/online invigilation
- Data given to tutors to support remote facilitation in 2020
- Holding of Virtual meetings, e.g., Staff, Departmental, School and Senate meetings
- ICT Integration course – in-service training of teachers
- BOU Online Ethics Management System (BOEMS) – online ethics clearance without any need to risk handling paper work
- e-Assessment Training by SAIDE Lecturers were trained to capacitate them with techniques of setting online assessment
- Exquisite online graduation in November 2020
- Mobile App to facilitate access of BOU resources online and offline
- BOU leading the e-Education framework, in line with Vision 2036 of Botswana
- Community engagement initiatives where BOU provided Open Schooling online programmes and some e-Resources from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to the general public through both the website and eLearning Platform. MASCOM project with zero rated services for students in 2020

- Establishment of Department of Educational Technology within the School of Education to oversee development and delivery of e-Education Training.

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic came with many challenges to the educational landscape, causing major disruptions in universities and other institutions, regarding business continuity. The institutions went abruptly into overdrive to re-invent themselves and remain relevant, thereby resorting to the online mode of delivery and have had to deal with the inherent problems with such move. It must also be acknowledged that while COVID-19 has created opportunities for innovations in teaching, it has unfortunately also compounded inequalities resulting in a widening of the digital divide for some societies that must also be addressed.

A major recommendation is therefore that, lofty as the shift to online learning provision can be, it is plagued with many drawbacks that must be addressed through the use of appropriate technologies and experts, in order to achieve the desired quality. Efforts must be made by various institutions and governments to make available and accessible provision of connectivity, infrastructure and ICT gadgets for students and teachers so as to curb the digital divide problem.

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