COVID-19's wake-up call:
Finding ways to make digital and remote learning a reality

Learning Brief

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of life in the global community. In the area of skills development, educational institutions have had to respond rapidly to the realities of lockdown regulations to ensure that learning continues for the thousands of students who have not been able to attend classes on campuses.

The African Union Development Agency-NEPAD, through its project, Skills Initiative For Africa (SIFA), has documented the learning experiences of training/learning institutions from a few countries in Africa that have implemented good practice and innovation in response to the pandemic. The Lessons Brief is a critical reflection of what has been learnt from these good practice responses. The aim of this reflection is to bring to light the agile responses of training institutions in Africa and highlight the broader and common challenges encountered in the continent. The lessons brief further looks into sustainability measures and provides insight into the future of learning. Credit goes to the institutions who participated and who have provided this insight. They are listed at the end of this brief.

Context

When the pandemic struck in March 2020 and economies all over the world were forced into lockdown, most educational institutions on the continent were in the midst of their first teaching semester. Their immediate response was to ensure that their institutions could survive, and that learning could continue for students.

Management and staff had to rapidly adjust thinking and deliberate on ways of utilising whatever resources they had at their disposal. In the ensuing weeks, as institutions came to grips with the impact of COVID on their operations, new and innovative ways of using technology to re-shape curricula began to emerge:

- Prioritising learning that could be done by students in lockdown

- Reviewing and adjusting curricula

- Contacting students to conduct surveys and establish the efficacy of using Technology Enabled Learning (TEL) to reach the marginalised, disadvantaged youth

- Putting plans in place to ensure that all students could access the learning, despite difficulties with smart devices and data access

- Identifying social media platforms that could be used for learning, e.g. Zoom, WhatsApp, Google Classroom and putting them to best use

- Maximising functionality of the institution's existing internal systems and platforms to achieve the reach and accessibility required

- Assessment and continuous feedback loops, to ensure that students were constantly engaged and their performance monitored

Lessons Learnt

As good practice institutions continue to sort out the "teething problems" and implement their plans, the lessons learnt from these experiences will in all likelihood change the face of these institutions.

1

Non-Negotiables

There is no doubt that the COVID experience has been a 'wake-up call' to institutions to step swiftly and fully into the new age of Technology Based Learning (TEL). The perception that learning happens only in a classroom exists in the minds of those who fear the changes that TEL brings. There are some non-negotiables, however:

- In the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its disruptive effect on economies all over the world, including Africa, the medium has to be the message for institutes of learning – resource up and skill up to deal with rapidly evolving technology now and into the future. "We are the change that we seek" – Barack Obama.

- Equitable access to technology in education is essential so that disadvantaged and vulnerable youth can be skilled up and enter the workforce with current and relevant skills.

- In order to achieve equitable access, partnerships between government, private sector and educational institutions is fundamental

2

Challenges Presenting as Opportunities

In the early stages of COVID lockdown, and in the panic to find quick solutions to an immediate problem, there were challenges that had to be managed and overcome. However, as time progressed, these challenges transformed into ideal opportunities to make the shifts that these institutions had already been considering.

The decision to make use of existing, relatively cost-effective social media platforms seemed like a huge step initially. However, the action was relatively seamless. Although access to smart devices and the cost of data for disadvantaged students was, and still remains, a challenge for the future, institutions found innovative and simple means of delivering effective learning. Not only that, but throughout this transition young people have had a rare opportunity to participate in the development of programmes and how they should be delivered. In many instances, they have brought a balance in thinking and a keen intelligence to the relevance of platforms, skills and content for learning in the future.

This has paved the way for exciting prospects in adopting blended approaches to learning, updating content for relevance in a changing world, and ensuring that there are solid, integrated frameworks for learning, as opposed to 'content dumps' into online repositories. To enable this, institutions are looking to incorporate best practice skills in distance, open and online learning.

The role of the lecturer or trainer shifted during lockdown. Many had to learn how to deliver training using a range of platforms. In the future, this role is likely to transition to that of facilitator of learning, mentor, coach, advisor; the person who can pull together learning for students who are studying remotely.

3 Welcome Surprises

There were some welcome surprises that emerged during these difficult times and provided a sense of hopefulness and a motivation to carry on:

- Young people are familiar with technology and able to get on with the job of learning through social media. It is not a major shift for them. Students are skilled and willing to engage with technology for learning. For many disadvantaged and vulnerable young people, it is only lack of access that is holding them back.

- Young people are resilient and innovative when given the opportunity, the structure and the skills.

- There is the realisation that collaboration, partnerships and a willingness to work together to learn and overcome obstacles is critical in adapting to change.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is upon us. It is already the age of robotics, virtual reality and Artificial Intelligence. The role of educational institutions is to skill up for the future. COVID has taught them that they can.

4 Sustainability Measures

Going back to the way things were prior to COVID is no longer an option. The question is how to sustain and continue to improve on what has been started on a continent where youth unemployment is a threat and where there is a need to drive prosperity and economic growth through education and job creation.

COVID has, in many respects, catapulted us into the future in terms of how and what we learn. Sustaining this and moving forward has consequences for skills development, youth employment and how Africa manages the speed of change that technology brings. There are many factors to consider if we are to learn broadly from the experience and sustain the trajectory into the future:

- In terms of skills development, COVID has brought into sharper focus the opportunity for learning institutions to think systemically about supply and demand, so that they can build a sustainable, holistic pipeline of skills, to meet current and future skills demands. For example, it is likely that more people will be shopping online, a trend that will continue into the future. Design and software development skills will be required - people who are 'tech savvy' and capable of thinking on their feet to provide technology designs and solutions.

- Access to technology enables the development of skills required for a technology-enabled world. Advocacy for technology and data to be accessible to students for education purposes is an important call to be taken up at the highest possible levels. It is likely to require, however, a deliberate and focused policy and a commitment from all stakeholders, both in the public and private sector.

- The notion that it might be possible to offset the capital cost of technology systems and tools against long-term cost of education and the reach that can be achieved is one that should be seriously considered.

'Now it is the time to embed into our teaching and learning practices collaboration, critical thinking and problem-solving skills to tackle serious problems we face in our society, such as revitalizing our urban and rural areas, reinvesting into agro processing industry and rejuvenating our health system. The problems we face as the African continent are vast, unique and difficult and they require the mobilization of all our motive forces especially the youth to think critically, creatively and collaboratively to tackle the problems of bridging the digital divide, technological exclusion and global alienation.'

Youth Leadership in the Fourth Industrial Revolution – *Professor Tshilidzi Marwala – from keynote address at Mail and Guardian's 200 Young South Africans Awards ceremony, June 2019*

Resources:

Nairobits

CAP Youth Development Institute

Start Up Africa

Women's Board Educational Co-operation Society

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