

COVID-19 and Higher Education in Ghana: The Case of a Public Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

This paper examines the ability of a public higher education in Ghana to adapt to changes in teaching and learning in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. Measures taken to ensure uninterrupted migration to online teaching and learning included a regular monthly supply of data bundle from an internet service provider to faculty members, select support staff and students in addition to regular training in the effective use of the SAKAI Learning Management System. Challenges encountered include inadequate internet access, occasional network interruptions during online classes and oversubscription of Zoom time slots at the departmental level. Despite these challenges, this public higher education institution was able to complete the 2019/2020 academic year fairly well.

Keywords: COVID-19, Ghana, learning, public higher education institution, teaching

Globally, higher education institutions have regularly used online platforms to engage students when there were sudden interruptions in academic activities either through natural disasters or otherwise. In South Africa for example, higher education institutions went online with teaching and learning when there were student demonstrations leading to university closures between 2015 and 2017 (Czerniewicz, 2020). In December 2019, an outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, Hubei province, in China led to a

declaration of a public health emergency by the World Health Organization on 30th January 2020 (Sohrabi et al., 2020). This virus changed the normal activities of every country leading to border closures, movement restrictions across borders and sensitization of citizenry on preventive measures that needed to be put in place to halt its spread (WHO, 2020).

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, educational institutions globally, have shifted teaching and learning engagements with students from face to face and blended modes to the online mode and Ghana is no exception. However, these shifts have not been without challenges. Ghana confirmed its first case of the virus on March 12, 2020 (ghanahealthservice.org/covid19/) and as the positive cases increased, all educational institutions were closed on March 15, 2020 as well as restrictions and suspensions placed on mass gatherings. This initial closure had an impact on the higher education sector as institutions had to adjust their teaching and learning modes in response. Invariably, the academic calendars of both private and public higher education institutions were affected. It is significant to note that Ghana's positive case count then was six. Currently, the cumulative case count is 92,562, with 1,587 active cases and 779 total recorded deaths for an estimated population of about 30 million (ghanahealthservice.org/covid19/). Consequent to the closures, Ghanaian higher education institutions had to adapt new ways of teaching and learning to stimulate student engagement and complete the academic year.

On the continental level, African countries needed alternative innovative learning platforms in the education sector so that its youth do not become further disadvantaged after the pandemic (African Union, 2020; Mohammed, 2020). The Ghanaian public and private higher education sector sought innovative ways to engage their students in teaching and learning to enable the completion of the academic calendar. Using the University of Ghana as a case, this paper examined how it successfully adapted to change during the pandemic and completed its academic calendar. This paper will delineate on the methods that this higher institution employed to engage students in online teaching and learning.

The University of Ghana is a public higher education institution in the West African country of Ghana. It was established in 1948 by the then British colonial government (Ofori-Attah, 2006) and has been ranked in the 151-200 band of 2020 *Times Higher Education's* Golden Age University Ranking for the second year in succession. Its current student population is over 38,000 (ug.edu.gh/about/overview). This public higher education

institution in Ghana is purposively selected for this paper for three reasons. It stands out from other public institutions in similar categories because first, the Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research (NMIMR), a leading biomedical research facility which began initial testing of COVID-19 samples, is part of the University of Ghana. Second, the university has a well-equipped Medical Centre of comparable status to any international health facility which serves as an avenue for treating critically ill COVID-19 patients. Third, it is one of the first public higher education institutions in Ghana to have a student, who had returned from abroad test positive for COVID-19. Thus, these three reasons enabled the selection of this higher education institution as to how it adapted to change during the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully completed its 2019/2020 academic calendar.

Change management is the “process of continually renewing an organization’s direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the ever-changing needs of external and internal customers...” (Moran & Brightman, 2001, p.14). Given the preceding definition of change management, the University of Ghana swiftly responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by modifying its instructional structures to benefit students. It leveraged on the learning management system that it had in place so that teaching and learning were not unduly interrupted. In response to the pandemic, the University of Ghana migrated all teaching and learning activities online for the remaining seven weeks of the second semester through an increased use of the SAKAI Learning Management System (LMS) and other virtual learning platforms. The migration was primarily in consonance with a communique issued by the National Council for Tertiary Education of Ghana that higher education institutions should continue online educational engagement with students and restrict face to face learning activities. To enable this online arrangement, the university provided a free internet data package for students, a select support staff and faculty members. Among others, the university also rolled out Zoom and Google classroom as alternative platforms to the SAKAI LMS. Vodafone Ghana, a noted internet service provider, agreed to zero rate access to SAKAI LMS for all students, support staff and faculty members using its network. The university also arranged for virtual training (a novel initiative) for faculty members and students who required it, as well as developed self-guide manuals and videos on the effective use of the SAKAI LMS. Faculty members, with help from instructional technologists, converted their teaching notes to online easy-to-access materials. The university emphasized asynchronous mode of teaching as against the synchronous mode so that students can have access

to recorded versions of the class (University of Ghana [UG] Newsfile-SE/001, 2020).

During the transition to online teaching and learning, both faculty members and students encountered a number of challenges. Initially faculty members were unable to obtain extended Zoom time slots when using departmental access as they were oversubscribed. To address this challenge faculty had to reschedule classes, and finding a suitable time for all students was sometimes a hassle. Second, there were issues with bandwidth as network interruptions occasionally occurred during virtual online classes. Moreover, the home locations of some students could not accommodate virtual learning as they had problems with internet access. Consequently, some students could not take part in the virtual online real time classes. Another challenge was that both faculty members and students sometimes ran out of data provided and had to buy additional data at their own expense. Internet access worked better at certain times of the day, especially in the late evenings, even though that was not a convenient time for classes for some students. To counteract the problem of unstable internet, faculty members recorded their classes and used the asynchronous mode of teaching instead of synchronous (Shaw, 2020). However, this was done sometimes, at an added cost to the faculty member. The perfect environment for uninterrupted teaching was also a challenge. Constantly, getting a quiet environment for smooth teaching became a luxury as some faculty members had to deal with some level of noise and background interruptions from family when working from a home location.

After the ease of restrictions in the country in May 2020, the institution initially made provision for final year students who were not able to take part in the online teaching and learning to relocate safely to campus to enable their completion of academic work and eventual graduation. Further, libraries, computer laboratories and staff provided the needed support to final year students who returned to campus while abiding strictly by the COVID-19 safety protocols. As a result, the university held its first virtual graduation on July 30, 2020. The institution also provided an opportunity to continuing students (who formed about ten per cent of the student population) and were unable to participate in its online teaching and learning programs to return to campus and complete the second semester of 2019/2020 academic year in person. (UG Reopening Notice-CL.16, 2020). In relation to the 2020/2021 academic year, the university is running an online modular system of teaching and learning, with very limited face to face interaction for programs demanding that type of engagement due to the

unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 virus (UG Proposals for Re-opening-CL.16, 2020).

Ultimately, the onset of COVID-19 pandemic has shown how a public higher education institution in Ghana can adapt to change. This university has evolved from an institution that emphasizes face-to-face meeting to one that now holds majority of its teaching and learning activities online. The university has leveraged on existing technological infrastructure to accommodate the surge in online teaching and learning. The pandemic has obliged faculty members and support staff to explore and utilize alternative platforms thus ensuring that students complete their programs within a specified timeframe. Online teaching and learning have become intertwined with the institution's outreach program to its clientele. Invariably, faculty members and support staff will require regular training in the usage of technology in order to keep skills current and up-to-date while engaging students and teaching effectively online. An innovative way has to be found to resolve the challenges of students who are unable to participate in the online teaching and learning programs of the university successfully due to technological challenges. A more in-depth paper could explore how distinct departmental programs have fared during the university's migration to online teaching and learning.

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