



POLICY BRIEF

Public-Private Partnerships during & after Covid-19: Strengthening Opportunities for Higher Education Access in Kenya

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Executive Summary

Public-private partnerships (PPP) have become essential for higher education delivery worldwide. Growing evidence shows that such partnerships create opportunities for improving access and resourcing higher education institutions, as well as improving service delivery in the education sector. As part of the growing need to explore opportunities for PPPs in enhancing higher education in Kenya especially in post-COVID-19 pandemic era, the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) commissioned a mixed methods study among higher education students, faculty, and other higher education stakeholders.

As the evidence shows, the private sector partnered with the State to support the transition into online teaching and learning. KENET distributed 5,000 SIM cards loadable with 30GB of data per month for free for students. Safaricom PLC and Telkom Kenya PLC also engaged in different partnership arrangements such as *edubundle* to support students and higher education institutions during the pandemic. The support notwithstanding, there exists critical gaps in access and utilization of these services, calling for the need to strengthen PPPs for increased access, equity and quality of higher education services in a post-COVID-19 pandemic era.

Key Messages:

- Drawing on opportunities realized during the COVID-19 pandemic, Public Private Partnerships (PPP) are essential and should be strongly pursued in the higher education sector.
- Despite the emerging PPP opportunities, there are enduring challenges of limited digital infrastructure, equity issues, a sound policy environment, and a lack of strategy.
- There is a need to strengthen policy frameworks to support PPP arrangements while ensuring targeted capacity building and coordinated support from critical stakeholders, including the private sector.
- Formation of standardised private sector inclusive Communities of Practice around key areas namely, Joint Faculty and Research Development Community of Practice; Joint Systems Change Program for Employability Community of Practice; and Joint Entrepreneurship Community of Practice and more to expand service provision in the service sector.



Context

Globally, Private Public Partnerships (PPPs) are considered the main platform to facilitate private participation in providing social services and a strategy to facilitate infrastructure development. **As an important plank for socio-economic and political development, there is need to increase access to higher education services including learning at masters and postgraduate levels.** Despite critical gains made in Kenya over the past years, poverty levels, dwindling government support, and recent Covid-19 have remained critical threats.

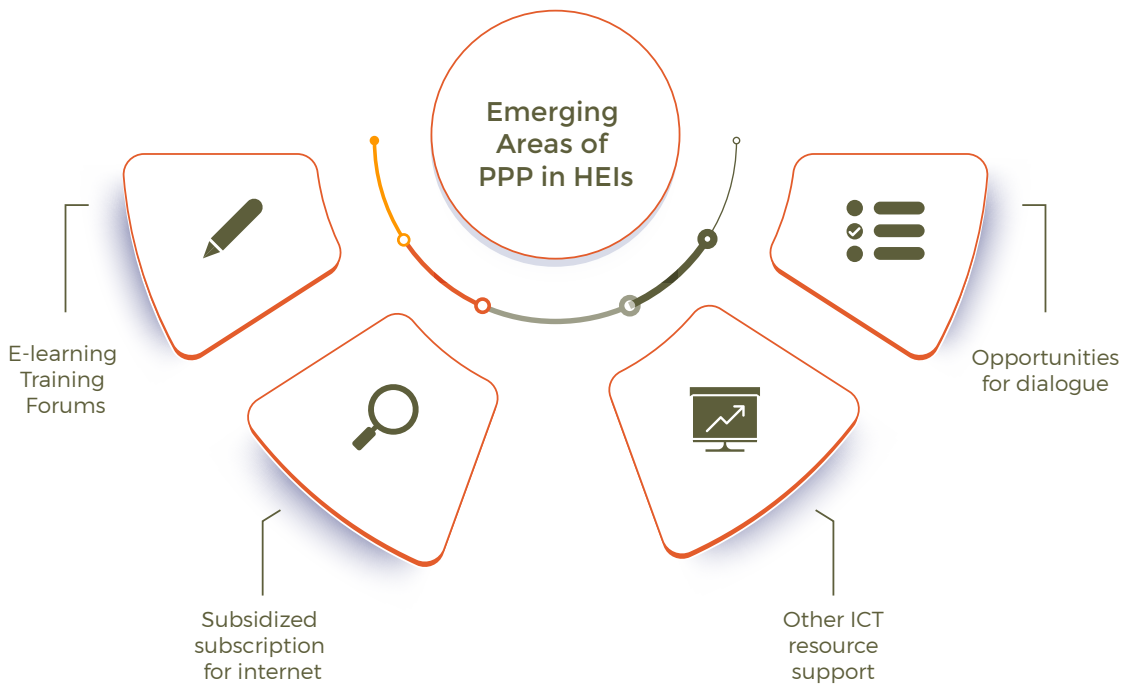
With the pandemic shocks and the ensuing challenges, there has emerged renewed interest to scale up investments and PPPs for effective higher education service delivery. **Several private sector players in the ICT sector like IBM, Microsoft, and mobile service providers have continued to play a significant role in facilitating access to online teaching and learning during the pandemic. The Kenya Education Network Trust (KENET) provided several universities**

with installations of ICT servers, provision of data bundles to individual students as well as specific waivers. Given the understanding of the relevance of PPP, this policy brief aims to bring to the attention of higher education stakeholders in Kenya, the emerging opportunities for PPPs created during Covid-19 and the need to strengthen and sustain such partnerships to improve access, equity, and quality of higher education. The brief draws on mixed-method research involving 34 universities and a total of 1162 respondents.

Findings

Emerging opportunities for Public Private Partnerships in Higher Education

While the COVID-19 pandemic caused severe disruptions to learning and education service provision, it also created significant opportunities for harnessing PPPs in higher education. Prior to the pandemic, several universities and colleges had made some significant progress in integrating ICT and digital tools to support teaching and learning. Qualitative



interviews with key stakeholders revealed that these investments played a significant role in ensuring continued teaching when the COVID-19 pandemic . **However, in most universities, the existing infrastructure was inadequate to sustain a fully-fledge transition and meet the demands for quality.** The limited digital resources attracted several private sector playersthat mobilized their resources and partnered with higher education institutions to enable a digital transition. Figure 1 below presents opportunities and new areas for partnerships that emerged out of the COVID-19 crisis.

The evidence shows emerging partnership opportunities for increasing access to higher education. Some universities partnered with the Commission for University Education (CUE) in organizing forums on training on elearning to equip course facilitators and instructors with necessary skills. In this case, the

IT departments were prepped to assist academic staff with online instruction. Evidence shows that leading universities such the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, and Moi University among others held several webinars to guide staff on approaching online learning in preparation for their transition to online. Other than training for their staff, universities also increased allocation of budget to purchase of critical infrastructure from leading service providers who through PPPs provided subsidized rates to enable access.

Furthermore, results show that several internet service providers (ISPs) partnered with universities for quality teaching and learning. These included Telkom *Soma Bundles*, and KENET discounted bundles. KENET distributed 5,000 SIM cards loadable with 30GB of data per month for free for students and was expected to continue for a year, post the pandemic. The company also

hosted the Learning Management System (LMS) on campus together with cloud technology for the universities. Responding to the research question on quality, one university staff, stated:

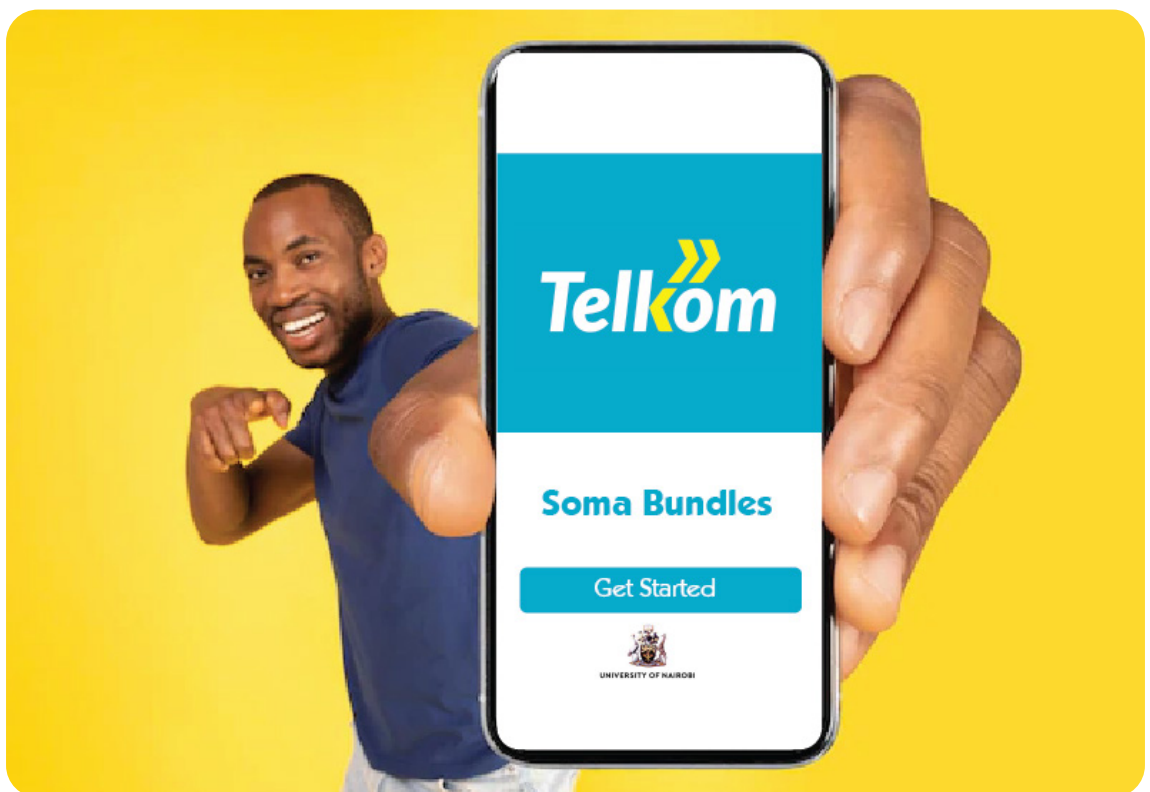
“To enhance the quality of instruction and delivery of essential services, some universities conducted daily reviews, centred on connectivity and devices for students and faculty, others engaged Safaricom and Telekom to provide subsidized subscription Wi-Fi rates”.

Challenges confronting higher education institutions in utilizing digital tools, also created an opportunity for close collaboration and partnership with various stakeholders, university community representatives, university leadership, academic staff, students, and private organisations such as telecommunication

companies. Such collaboration and dialogued are necessary for developing appropriate strategies for stronger PPPs.

Existing Constraints to Effective PPPs

The emerging opportunities notwithstanding, critical constraints remain in ensuring effective PPPs in education sector. First, our study revealed inadequacies with regards to the PPPs in addressing the challenges higher education sector faces in developing and maintaining a robust digital infrastructure to support the growing need for online teaching and learning. There were several students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, that did not have access to the benefits of these partnerships. The



Source : Freepik

transition to online learning was therefore not equitable in terms of learning opportunities for the students due to their diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Secondly, the emerging PPPs **did not effectively capture the need for tooling and re-tooling of teaching staff with effective digital skills and pedagogy of teaching virtually.** The evidence shows some academic staff lacked online teaching experience hence were not enthusiastic about transitioning their services to online platforms. A number of students were equally unmotivated as they lacked appropriate devices such as laptops to facilitate their utilization of online platforms. They also lacked the requisite attitude and self-discipline suitable for the new learning environment at home. Furthermore, the lack of robust digital infrastructure and resources for online delivery and difficulties teaching practical courses, especially in applied science and engineering courses, made this shift even more challenging.

Interviews from stakeholders and evidence from desk review of policies and legislations showed lack of clarity in the articulation of structure and threshold of PPPs. Further, there seemed to be a lacuna in law in the sense that PPPs are not considered as procurement per the Procurement Act (NCLR, 2015) but rather as an agreement between parties involved. PPPs are missing under the Procurement Act, leaving room for compromise and governance issues considering that the private sector interest is profit and the public sector interest is service delivery to citizens.

Overall, from a private sector perspective, it is intimated that institutions of higher learning are the largest consumers of their products and thus partnership with HEIs becomes a natural thing to do. Such partnerships not only strengthen the ecosystem of actors in the education system, but also helps in formalization of relationships among partnerships.

Public Private Partnership (PPP)



Policy recommendations

Given the opportunities presented by PPP for the future of higher education, there is the need to:

ADOPTION OF PPP AGENDA IN THE STRATEGIC WORKPLANS of higher education institutions. This should help prioritize infrastructure, quality assurance and Public-Private affiliation arrangements to effectively achieve the twin goal of expanding access and maintaining equity.



FLEXIBILITY AMONG UNIVERSITIES to allow modification of structures, practices and process when faced with unforeseen environmental changes such as the COVID 19 pandemic and make them relevant to their context as opposed to one shoe fits all.



STRENGTHEN EXISTING FRAMEWORKS THAT PROMOTE PPP INITIATIVES. This includes supporting a legal framework to embed PPPs and formalize memoranda of understanding between universities and public institutions with private sector actors.



References

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